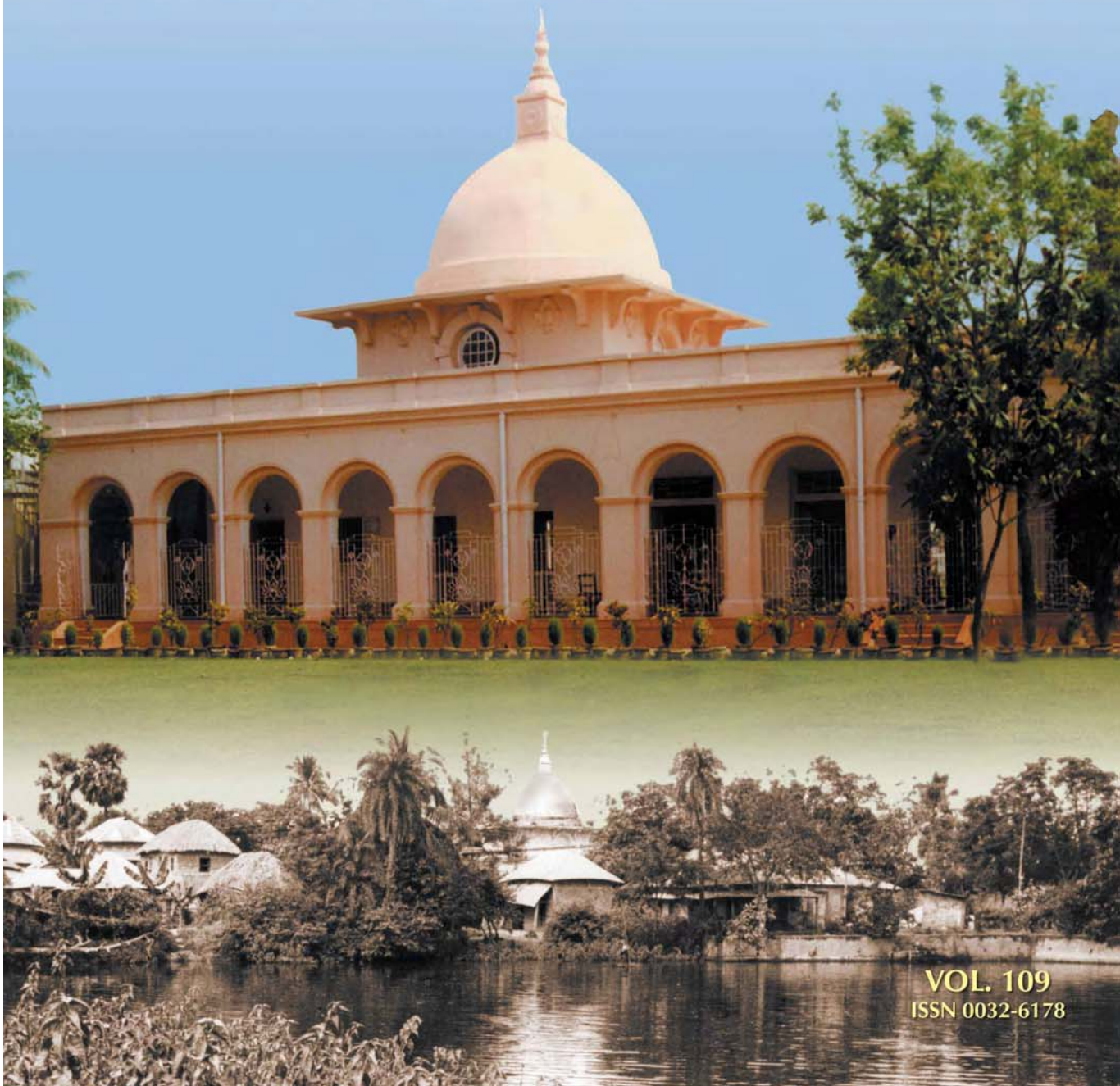


# **PRABUDDHA BHARATA** *or* **AWAKENED INDIA**



**JANUARY  
2004**

A Monthly Journal of the Ramakrishna Order  
Started by Swami Vivekananda in 1896



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# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

JANUARY 2004

## CONTENTS

Mother's Wisdom	3	Sri Sarada Devi—The Gentle Power	34
To Our Readers	4	Swami Atmapriyananda	
This Month	4	The Greatness of Misery	39
Editorial: Ripples in Stillness	7	Swami Chetanananda	
Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago	12	The Wisdom of Holy Mother	47
The Embodiment of Divine Grace	14	Swami Abhiramananda	
Swami Adiswarananda		A Prolegomenon to Devotion	52
The Spotless Autumnal Moon	19	Philip Rosoff-Horne	
C S Ramakrishnan		Purity Incarnate	58
Leaning 'Soft Skills' from the Life		Swami Brahmeshananda	
and Message of Holy Mother	22	The Paramahansa's Child	63
Dr Sumita Roy		Dr Prema Nandakumar	
Sri Sarada Devi—The Eternal Mother	28	Sarada Math: Why Not During	
Asim Chaudhuri		Mother's Time?..	68
		Kumud Bandhu Sen	

(Continued on next page)



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**Cover:** Sri Sarada Devi, the Holy Mother's temple at Jayrambati seen today and a period photograph in the foreground. The sacred village where Mother was born for the good of all Her children in 1853.



यथाग्नेर्दाहिकाशक्ती रामकृष्णे स्थिता हि या ।  
सर्वविद्यास्वरूपां तां सारदां प्रणमाम्यहम् ॥

She who inheres in Sri Ramakrishna  
even as burning power inheres in fire—  
to that Sarada, the embodiment of all knowledge,  
I offer my salutations.

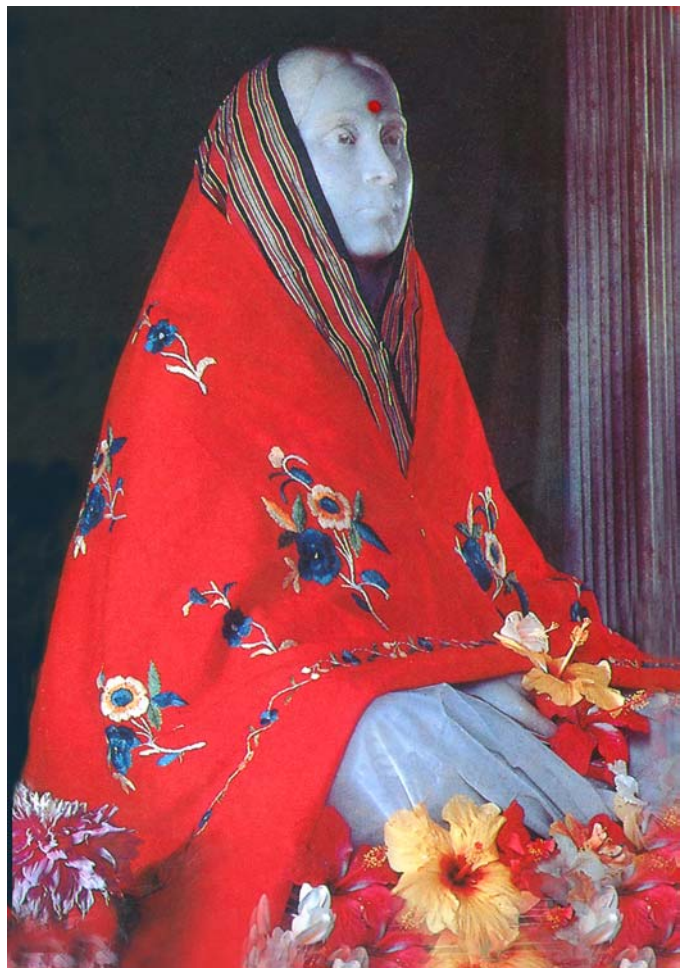
—Swami Saradananda

प्रसीद मातर्विनयेन याचे नित्यं भव स्नेहवती सुतेषु ।  
प्रेमैकबिन्दुं चिरदग्धचित्ते विषिञ्च चित्तं कुरु नः सुशान्तम् ॥

O Mother, be ever loving and gracious to your children;  
Sprinkle in our parched hearts  
a drop of love and grant us peace—  
that is my supplication to you.

—Swami Abhedananda





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उत्तिष्ठत  
जाग्रत  
प्राप्य  
वरान्निबोधत ।

# PRABUDDHA BHARATA

**Arise! Awake! And stop not till the goal is reached!**

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## Mother's Wisdom



**T**he aim of life to realize God and remain immersed in contemplation of Him. God alone is real and everything else is false. God is one's very own, and this is the eternal relationship between God and creatures. One realizes God in proportion to the intensity of one's feeling for Him.

Even the injunctions of destiny are cancelled if one takes refuge in God. Destiny strikes off with its own hand what it has foreordained for such a person.

As you smell the fragrance of a flower while handling it or the smell of sandalwood while rubbing it against a stone, so you obtain spiritual awakening by constantly thinking of God.

One should desire of God desirelessness. Desire is the obstacle to liberation.

The mind is everything. It is in the mind that one feels pure or impure. A man first makes his own mind guilty and then sees another's fault. Can you injure anybody by enumerating his faults? You only injure yourself. I cannot see anybody's shortcomings. If a man does a trifle for me, I try to remember even that. To see faults in others! Forgiveness is a great religious austerity. There no virtue higher than forbearance.

One must always do some work. Only through work can one remove the bondage of work. Total detachment comes later. One should not be without work even for a moment. Work helps one to fend off idle thoughts. If one is without work such thoughts rush into one's mind.

I am the Mother of the virtuous, I am the Mother of the wicked. Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, 'I have a mother.'



## To Our Readers



With this issue *Prabuddha Bharata* enters the 109th year of its publication. The year 2003 marked the 150th birth anniversary of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, to whom this special issue is dedicated. This issue is a nosegay of articles by monks, nuns and Mother's other devotees and admirers, portraying varied aspects of her unique personality that made and still make the whole world her own. There is some inevitable repetition of ideas in a spe-

cial issue of this kind. But we are sure they will only enhance the feeling of Mother's presence as one reads the articles.

Other regular features and serials will continue from the next issue.

On this occasion we send our greetings and best wishes to all our readers, contributors, reviewers, advertisers and well-wishers, with a request to popularize this journal among their near and dear. \*

## ∞ This Month ∞

**Ripples in Stillness**, this month's editorial, discusses certain significant traits of Holy Mother that we can struggle to emulate.

**Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago** features excerpts from an article 'Master and Disciple' by 'A Sannyasin' and a clipping from 'News and Notes'.

**The Embodiment of Divine Grace** by Swami Adiswaranandaji is an absorbing portrayal of the significance of some important features of Holy Mother's life: her marriage with Sri Ramakrishna, her unique motherhood with unstinted love for all and her continuing presence responding to her children's prayers. A former editor of this journal, the author is a senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order and head of the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York.

**The Spotless Autumnal Moon—Sri Sarada** by Sri C S Ramakrishnan is a delineation of the two important teachings from Holy Mother's last message. A former editor of the Ramakrishna Order's English monthly

*Vedanta Kesari* and a regular contributor to this journal, the author is closely associated for several decades with Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.

Mother's was an ideal life holding many lessons to better our own everyday lives. **Learning 'Soft Skills' from the Life and Message of Holy Mother** by Dr Sumita Roy is a portrayal of such lessons from striking incidents from her life. An Associate Professor of English at the Osmania University, Hyderabad, the author has decades-long association with the Ramakrishna Order and regularly writes for this journal.

**In Sri Sarada Devi—The Eternal Mother** Sri Asim Chaudhuri analyses Holy Mother's innate greatness, her role within the Ramakrishna Order, and how she is an enigma to the West. The author recently retired as a Six Sigma Black Belt professional with Caterpillar Inc, a multinational company based in Peoria, Illinois, USA. He is well known for his research work *Swami Vivekananda in Chicago: New Findings*, published by Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata.

### In **Sarada Devi—The Gentle Power**

Swami Atmapriyanandaji describes how her personality was a synthesis and unification of the Mother principle, how though apparently soft her gentle sattvic power was more powerful than rajas. The author is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order and Principal of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur.

Holy Mother's was an ideal life exemplifying how amid worldly problems and misery one can retain one's equanimity if one's life is anchored in God. In **The Greatness of Misery** Swami Chetananandaji traces incidents from her life depicting her power of forbearance when faced with adversities, proving that her life was 'one long stillness of prayer'. A senior monk of the Ramakrishna Order, the author is head of the Vedanta Society of St Louis and is particularly known for his works *God Lived with Them, They Lived with God* and *Ramakrishna as We Saw Him*.

The mutual divine relationship between Sri Ramakrishna and Mother, her unique motherhood, the manifestation of the Gargi-Maitreyi ideal in her, the far-sightedness behind her decision-making, how she valued education—**The Wisdom of Holy Mother** is an absorbing portrayal of all these aspects by Swami Abhiramanandaji. The author heads the College of Education of the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyalaya, Coimbatore.

In **A Prolegomenon to Devotion** Philip Rosoff-Horne analyses devotion from three angles: the primary error of devotionism, caveats on devotional practice and the nature of true devotion. In the light of the analysis he concludes by explaining what true devotion to Holy Mother entails. The author is a probationary brahmacharin at the Vedanta Society of Sacramento.

Swami Abhedanandaji described Sri Sarada Devi as Pavitratā Svarūpiṇī, embodi-

ment of purity. **Purity Incarnate** is a discussion by Swami Brahmeshanandaji on the pure and purifying personality of Holy Mother. A former editor of *Vedanta Kesari*, the author heads the Ramakrishna Mission Ashrama, Chandigarh.

**The Paramahansa's Child** by Dr Prema Nandakumar is a portrayal of the child-mother spiritual relationship between Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna, Mother's immaculate purity, her spiritual poise and her continuing presence. A researcher and literary critic from Srirangam, the author is a regular contributor to this journal.

Swami Vivekananda wanted to first build a Math for Holy Mother: 'First Mother and Mother's daughters, then Father and Father's sons, can you understand this?' Why then didn't Sarada Math come into being when Mother was alive? Sri Kumud Bandhu Sen throws light on this important question in his article **Sarada Math: Why Not during Mother's Time?** The article originally appeared in the December 1952 issue of this journal under the title 'Reminiscences of the Holy Mother'. The author came in contact with the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna at the Alambazar Math. Many of his articles have appeared in *Udbodhan*. He remained a bachelor and passed away on 14 December 1962 when he was 82 years old.

Drawing from Sister Nivedita's observations, Swami Sandarshanandaji portrays some inspiring aspects of Mother's personality in **Holy Mother—Some Glimpses**. The author is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order from the Ramakrishna Mission Vidyapith, Deoghar.

In **Mother Today** Pravrajika Madhavanpranaji discusses the contemporary relevance of Mother's life; how she was instrumental in founding the Ramakrishna Order;

how she is a role model in our everyday life; and the twofold purpose of her motherhood. The Harish incident in Mother's life also receives a special interpretation in the article. A disciple of Swami Ashokanandaji, the author is a nun at the convent of the Vedanta Society of Northern California.

**Concealed Greatness** by Swami Nityasthanandaji is a delineation of various facets of Holy Mother's personality: her universal motherhood, how she differed from earthly mothers and the intertwining of mother and guru in her. The author also examines the psychological implication of Mother's prescription for peace of mind and analyses the aptness of the epithet *Sri* for her. The author is known for his thought-provoking articles in Kannada and English. A monk of the Ramakrishna Order, he edits its Kannada organ, *Viveka Prabha*, published from Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore.

**Holy Mother as Guru** by Prof N V C Swamy and Ms Heisnam Jina Devi is a depiction of Mother's training under Sri Ramakrishna and her role as a unique spiritual teacher. A former director of the Indian Institute of Technology, Chennai, Prof Swamy is the dean of yoga and physical sciences at the Vivekananda Yoga Mahavidyapeetham, Bangalore. The author is closely associated with the Ramakrishna Order for the past two decades. Ms Heisnam Jina Devi is a post-graduate in biology and an MS in Hindu religious studies with specialization in yoga philosophy and meditation.

Outlining the psychological malady of loneliness and other ills of our times, Swami Satyamayanandaji describes in his article **The Solution to the Growing Malaise of Our Times** Holy Mother's role in the much-needed mental cleansing with her unique mother-heart and mother-love. The author is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order from

Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, and is one of our regular contributors.

**In Adored by Countless People** Dr Prabhushankara describes five human aspects of Holy Mother that endear her to many. The author was a professor of Kannada and later the first visiting professor of the Vivekananda Chair at the University of Mysore. A writer and speaker of repute, he has a number of books and papers to his credit in Kannada and English.

**Mother's Last Words: Most Primordial, Most Modern** is a well-researched article by Pravrajika Akhandapranaji dwelling on Mother's last message. Marshalling evidence from prehistoric times, the author argues that making the whole world our own has been a common theme through the ages. After discussing the different connotations of the word *Ma* citing many sources, the author rightly underlines the need to make the world our own in whatever way we can. The author is a nun at the convent of the Vedanta Society of Southern California.

**In So Simple, Yet So Profound** Swami Atmashraddhanandaji tries to plumb the depths of profundity behind Mother's simplicity and down-to-earth nature, attuned as she was always with God. The author is a monk of the Ramakrishna Order from Sri Ramakrishna Vidyashala, Mysore.

Holy Mother's childlike simplicity, empathy and her unique motherly love—Swami Atmajnanandaji recounts these traits of hers in **Her Appealing Human Aspect**. The author is a monk of the Ramakrishna order from Sri Ramakrishna Ashrama, Mysore.

The second section of this issue, titled **What Appeals to Me in Holy Mother**, carries shorter articles on the subject from sixteen of her Western and Eastern admirers. \*

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# Ripples in Stillness

## EDITORIAL

**D**earest Mother—I wish we could send you a wonderful hymn, or a prayer. But somehow even that would seem too loud, too full of noise! ... we should be very still and quiet before you—except indeed for a little fun! Surely the wonderful things of God are all quiet—stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and the sunlight and the sweetness of the gardens and of the Ganges, these are the silent things that are like you!<sup>1</sup> That was part of Sister Nivedita's poetic letter to Holy Mother. Yes, trying to write on Holy Mother is like polluting silence with prattle and drowning sense into sound. Though eventful, her life needs more to be admired and adored with a view to emulation rather than made noise about. Yet, oblivious of creating ripples in the 'long stillness of prayer' we venture into dwelling on some of Mother's noble and inspiring traits. Two reasons support our endeavour: First, nothing can be more purifying than a mental dip into her pure life; second, a mother doesn't mind her child's prattle—not Holy Mother in any case.

### Purity Born of Divinity

The first thing that strikes a devotee of Mother is her exceptional purity of mind. If Sri Ramakrishna was an embodiment of burning renunciation and purity, her greatness was no less. Her pure mind saw nothing impure or imperfect. Physical purity is of easy accomplishment. Mental purity needs mind discipline. One is pure in proportion to the reduction of one's identification with the body and mind and increase in identification with one's divine nature, the Atman. The purest mind ceases to be mind, but becomes one with the Atman, says Sri Ramakrishna. Holy Mother

was pure to the marrow. Her character was pure, her life was pure—she was purity itself (Pavitratā Svarūpiṇī), says Swami Abhedananda. Sri Ramakrishna's alluded to parts of the ocean that remain frozen because of cold. Even so, said he, God's forms are nothing but the formless Brahman congealed by the cooling influence of bhakti. Even as ice is water all through, a divine personality like Mother was purity all over—from core to periphery.

Her outer cloak was too thin and fragile to hide her pure and divine nature. She rarely revealed her true nature to anyone, but it shone forth through some occasional casual remarks of hers. The cook in her Jayrambati house once insisted on bathing at nine in the evening since she had touched a dog. Mother discouraged a cold-water bath at that late hour and asked her to wash her hands and feet and change her cloth. When the cook was not satisfied, Mother suggested sprinkling and drinking a few drops of Ganga water. When that too failed to satisfy the cook, Mother said, 'Then touch me'!<sup>2</sup>

An aspirant experiences her purifying influence only when he tries to cast his life in the mould of Ramakrishna-Sarada Devi. In other words, only a struggle for purity in our own lives can help us appreciate a little of Mother's purity and stand in adoration and supplication before her benign form. The impure mind steadfastly pulls us out every time we 'stray' towards divinity. Every time the mind is one up on us we remember, 'I too am Mother's son; she will strengthen me and protect me.'

Holy Mother is not just another deity to be worshipped with flowers and offerings. Only moulding ourselves on that pure life can make us her true children. Though she is the Mother of the good and the wicked, her true

child will struggle to belong to the first class and try to press her for his divine inheritance from her.

### Mother for Eternity

Though Holy Mother had no children born of the flesh, she was the Mother of all—humans and animals alike. We have had earthly mothers in innumerable births, but here is a Mother who stands by us all through our evolution. 'With the earthly mother there is umbilical separation, but not with her.'<sup>3</sup> Swami Virajanda, one of her disciples, calls her Chirakaler Ma, Mother for Eternity, implying a mother who transcends time, a mother with a spiritual dimension. We are all sparks of divinity issued from that Mother-fire and unto her we will return.<sup>4</sup> She keeps attracting us to her, ever reminding us of our own burning power and divine heritage.

'Whenever you are in distress, remember you have a Mother'—reflecting on these words of Mother can lift us up from the 'misery-go-round' of this world and remind us that life has a higher dimension, a greater goal than a mere struggle for existence. And she patiently waits for us to be done with our play with earthly dolls and claim our spiritual inheritance from her. Sri Ramakrishna did not come to eat rasagollas, she said. Nor did she. She could accept the sins of poison-like characters whom pure souls like Swamis Brahmananda and Premananda could not accept. Perhaps, those who strayed received more of her unstinting grace than others.

She could see virtue even in those whom society considered bad. One day a Muslim, known to be a bandit, offered her some bananas and said, 'Mother I have brought these for the Master; will you accept them?' Of course, I will,' replied Holy Mother. 'Give them to me. You have brought them for the Master. I shall certainly take them.' The man was then rewarded with some sweets. A woman devotee who was present was surprised and said to Mother, 'We know he is a

thief. How can you offer his things to the Master?' After he had left Holy Mother scolded the woman and said, 'I know who is good and who is bad.' Her remark that she is the Mother of the wicked as well as the Mother of the good kindles hope in all of us.

### A Unique Relationship

'A husband is not loved for the sake of the husband, but for the sake of the Atman. A wife is not loved for the sake of the wife, but for the sake of the Atman. ... Everything in this world is not loved for its own sake, but for the sake of the Atman,' says the *Brihadarankaya Upanishad*.<sup>5</sup> Mother's life with Sri Ramakrishna validated this mantra. He saw in her, in his mother and in every woman the Divine Mother Bhavatarini. Holy Mother in turn looked upon him as Mother Kali herself, as evident from her reaction to his passing away. When a disciple asked her later how she looked upon Sri Ramakrishna, she said he was to her *pūrṇa-brahma-sanātana*, the absolute, eternal Brahman. When the disciple said that to every wife her husband is supposed to be God, she said that Sri Ramakrishna was Brahman to her both as a husband and also in a general way.

When Sri Ramakrishna asked her if she had come to drag him down to the path of samsara, spontaneously came her unique reply: 'No, why on earth should I drag you down to the path of samsara? I am here to help you in your chosen path.' The significance of this unique reply becomes apparent only on deep reflection. Swami Budhananda's reflection captures some of her glory:

Here is a glimpse of the real Sarada. It is no borrowed light. It is the light itself. That primal sin of Eve was, as it were, thus required by one of her sex after so many centuries. The prestige which Sri Saradamani conferred on the entire womanhood by this act of supreme renunciation has yet to be understood and assumed by the womenfolk of the world. This was not only a great event in the lives of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Sarada Devi; correctly understood it is one of the greatest events in human history. This

was virtually opening the floodgates of liberation for the millions. Sri Ramakrishna could not have been the 'Kapala-mochana' that he is, unless Sri Saradamani had been the Holy Mother that she is. Think, for instance, what would have happened if Sri Ramakrishna were to turn an ordinary householder! There was no law under the sun which could have barred Sri Sarada from claiming her right according to dharma. *But how very easily she transcended the urge of becoming the mother of a few, for was she not the Mother of all? Thus in one sense Sri Ramakrishna was gift of Sri Sarada to humanity.*<sup>6</sup> (Emphasis added)

Again, she admitted to a disciple that she looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as her son.<sup>7</sup> This was evident from the way she cared for the Master by her devoted service to him (and his disciples) at Dakshineswar when he was alive, and the way she tended to his presence in the picture after his passing away.

Yet she never considered herself as someone having a special claim on Sri Ramakrishna, but rather looked upon herself as one of those who were graciously granted shelter by him. In later days, none of the women devotees around her felt that Mother was closer to the Master or had a special claim on him. They felt that Mother was also one like them, having taken refuge in the Master.<sup>8</sup> Here is an eyewitness account by Sister Devamata:

She lived as they [the few woman disciples who always lived with her] did, performing the same homely tasks, making no effort to differentiate herself from others save by greater modesty, greater gentleness and humility. ... By her outward manner she was the most obscure of all the household, yet beneath the veil of simplicity which enveloped her, there was a lofty majesty of bearing which caught the heart and bowed it in prayerful homage at her feet. The human covering was too thin to hide the radiance of divine consciousness beneath.<sup>9</sup>

An elderly woman devotee visited Mother during her last illness and started praising her: 'You are Jagadamba (the Mother of the Universe) ...' Mother rebuked her sharply: 'Off from here! "Jagadamba"! I have been

saved just because he graciously granted me refuge at his feet. "You are Jagadamba, you are this, you are that ..."—get away from here.'<sup>10</sup>

In Dakshineswar there were occasions when she could not meet the Master even once in two months despite her living just some sixty feet from his room. But never was she on that account jealous of others. On the contrary, she would tell herself, 'O mind, what austerity have you performed to merit his darshan every day?' Sri Ramakrishna was everything for her. Her being was so full of Sri Ramakrishna that Swami Abhedananda addressed her as 'Rāmakṛṣṇa-gata-prāṇā'. After initiating her disciples, she would point to Sri Ramakrishna as the real guru. Says Swami Budhananda, 'If the Holy Mother holds aloft and represents any ideal, it is the ideal of God-centred, God-circumferenced, God-soaked life, which is verily the Ramakrishna ideal.'<sup>11</sup>

### Forbearance Unsurpassed

A fraction of the adversities that Holy Mother faced is enough to unnerve the most stoic of human beings. A study of her life makes us humble. We will no more make a song about how bravely we faced a situation or curse our fate if the situations are beyond our endurance limit. Holy Mother's putting up with the adversities around her was not mere stoicism. True, there are people in the world who can suffer adversities without a murmur. But without a spiritual anchor, a sense of meaninglessness of and utter disgust with life is sure to lurk behind the veneer of calmness. Holy Mother's calmness differed from this variety. Her mind was ever tuned to the Infinite; she kept it down to a lower level out of compassion, to fulfil her promise of assisting the Master in his mission. 'Is she tortured by the perversities of any about her? The only sign is a strange quiet and intensity that comes upon her,' says Sister Nivedita. The strange quiet and intensity perhaps implied the withdrawal of her mind from the immedi-

ate surroundings to the Infinite. She herself said on occasions, 'The vision of God is in the palm of my hand'; 'I can have it whenever I want'; 'In the midst of worldly activities, whenever I desire, I understand with a flash that all this is nothing but a play of *Mahamaya*.'<sup>12</sup>

Her compassion for her tormentors was phenomenal. Once, incensed at Holy Mother, her niece Radhu—no less crazy than her mother—flung a brinjal at her. Mother's back became swollen immediately with the impact. Mother looked at the Master's portrait and prayed to him, 'O Master, she is senseless; please don't take offense at her misdeed.' She took the dust of her own feet and rubbed it on Radhu's head so that Radhu did not have to suffer for her foolish karma.

Her demanding brothers, crazy sister-in-law and her daughter, and a niece with washing mania—with their own idiosyncrasies—were veritable thorns in her flesh. Yet she suffered them all, with Radhu as the fulcrum, to keep her ever-soaring mind tied to the earthly plane. Why? Out of compassion for souls eager to break their bonds of transmigratory existence. And again, as one who lived a model life, she taught us that it is possible to live what the *Bhagavadgita* teaches: 'Having come to this transient and miserable world, worship Me.'<sup>13</sup>

### A Model for Karma-yogins

Holy Mother was an exemplar of her own teaching: 'One must always do some work. Only through work can one remove the bondage of work. Total detachment comes later. One should not be without work even for a moment. Work helps one to fend off idle thoughts. If one is without work such thoughts rush into one's mind.'<sup>14</sup> Right from childhood, hers was an active life. It was this active life that made her retain her bearings when people in her village murmured about her husband having gone mad in Dakshineswar.

In Dakshineswar she had a busy routine from 3:00 am. She cooked untiringly for Sri Ramakrishna and his disciples in that tiny octagonal room in the nahabat, the distance between whose opposite sides measured hardly eight feet. No work was small or insignificant for her. Even inanimate things including the much-cited broom and basket received her respect.

The *Gita* description of a karma-yogin fitted her admirably. Three important verses come to mind: (1) 'He who sees inaction in action and action in inaction, he is wise among men; he is a yogi, and he has performed all actions.'<sup>15</sup> She enjoyed bliss within her as she went about her activities in Dakshineswar. No inconvenience came in the way of her service. That was because the sheet anchor of her activities was love—love for her divine husband and his mission; for had she not promised to assist him?; (2) 'He who is free from attachment and egotism, endowed with fortitude and enthusiasm and unperturbed by success or failure—he is called a *sattvic* worker.' (18.26); (3) 'As the ignorant work, attached to their work, so should the enlightened work, but without attachment in order to guide people on the right path.' (3.25)

Her close companion Yogin Ma wondered where was the all-renouncing Sri Ramakrishna and where was Mother steeped in worldly problems. Sri Ramakrishna appeared to her in a vision and showed the corpse of a newborn baby floating on the Ganga. He asked her 'Can the Ganga ever be polluted? Know her as such. She is not different from me.' Though immersed in activities, she could have a vision of God just like that, as if it was a fruit in her palm. Sister Devamata had basked in her purifying presence. She has this to say about her:

Those who had the rare blessing of living with the Holy Mother learned that religion was a sweet, natural, joyous thing; that purity and holiness were tangible realities; that the odour of sanctity was literally a sweet perfume overlay-

ing and destroying the foulness of material selfishness. Compassion, devotion, God-union were her very nature; one scarcely knew that she possessed them. It was through the soothing benediction of a word or touch that one sensed their presence.<sup>16</sup>

### Lived Her Last Teaching

Her prescription for peace has been quoted and discussed ever so many times by ever so many people that one more discussion could appear like a platitude. But she lived her own teaching. She did not look for others' faults. And that holds great hope to all of us with our own burden of faults. A seemingly trivial incident from her life validates a wonderful expression about her: 'A unique feature of her maternal love was its constitutional disinclination to notice the faults of others.'<sup>17</sup>

A lady disciple of hers placed in her hands a painting of Sri Krishna that she had done on a cloth, and did pranam to her. 'Did you do this, my child?' asked Mother. 'Yes,' replied the devotee. 'Well done! What a beautiful expression on the face!' Mother showed the painting to those around and said, 'Nicely done. What do you say?' Everyone agreed with her. Mother touched the painting to her head, kept it aside and talked to the devotee about her welfare. She then gave her some prasada. Golap Ma chanced to come there and Mother told her, 'See, what a nice painting.' Pointing to the devotee, Mother said, 'She has done it.' Golap Ma replied, 'Everything is all right, but the left hand is a bit stouter than the right.' Everyone burst into a laugh.

Now let us briefly imagine how Mother would have managed the situation. If she had spoken of Golap Ma's fault-finding, that would amount to fault-finding on her part. On the contrary, if she did nothing, the devotee's embarrassment would not ease. Mother assuaged the devotee and praised Golap Ma too: 'Golap has pointed out the defect. Her taste is different, my dear. She has seen and heard a great deal. That's why she didn't like it. Golap is thoroughgoing in her work. The Master's

belongings are of her doing. Devotees' mosquito nets, their pillows and all are her done by Golap. There is not a trace of idleness in her.'<sup>18</sup>

\* \* \*

What is significant is her continuing presence responding to her children's prayers and guiding them. That is not surprising, she being our Eternal Mother. Her noble life and teachings are for us to contemplate. She did sixteen parts so that her children could struggle to do at least one part. Her pure form is for us to adore and supplicate. And what do we pray for? In her own words, for desirelessness (*nirvāsanā*) and discrimination (*sadbuddhi*). In addition, we will do well to pray to her for purity, for we cannot have more of it. \*

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# Prabuddha Bharata—100 Years Ago

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January 1904

## Master and Disciple

*Spirituality can be communicated just as really as I can give you a flower. This is true in the most literal sense. —Swami Vivekananda*

**D**isciple: ‘According to your instructions, I have always been repeating mentally and meditating on the word which, you said, was the symbol of my *ishta-devata*. It is several months since I began. Yet I do not see Him. What is the reason? Also I cannot understand how one can see a *deva* by mentally repeating a word.’

Master: ‘Every form (*rupa*) has an idea (*nama*) corresponding to it. Again every idea has a sound-symbol, that is a word corresponding to it. Conversely, every word is associated with an idea and every idea with a form. Form, idea and word are always associated with one another and by no possible means of analysis can one be separated from the others.

‘For instance, take the form [of a] cow. Its idea is the mental aggregate of all the attributes found in a cow. When we see a cow, her form calls up in the mind the cow-idea and we say audibly or in thought, “It is a cow.” Conversely, if we hear the word *cow*, when no cow is present before us, the word calls up in the mind the cow-idea and we see in imagination the form [of a] cow.

‘This relation between word, idea and form is obvious. They who know the laws of the spiritual world add to this that words can be made receptacles of spiritual force. The spiritual teacher, they say, communicates spiritual force to a word; then the disciple receives the word from him. The word, containing such force, if repeated by the receiver, makes him perceive not the imaginary but the real form associated with the ideas signified by it.

‘God in His infiniteness is inconceivable to man. The *devas* are His many differentiated aspects looked at from particular standpoints. Each of them is a form and associated with particular ideas. The sages saw them in their deepest spiritual perception, found words symbolizing and expressing as nearly as possible the particular forms of God they saw. When animated with the spiritual force communicated to them by the spiritual teacher and received from him by the disciple and repeated by the latter, these words make him realize the forms of God they symbolize.

‘Truly spiritual men alone can communicate the spiritual force to a word. The power of such a word will depend on the amount of the force communicated. A more spiritual man can communicate more force than one less spiritual. The incarnations are the highest manifestations of God through man. They are the repositories of immense spiritual force. They can communicate so much force to a word that the receiver, only hearing or repeating it once, realizes the form of God symbolized by it. Such great teachers are few and far between. The words received from other teachers are far less potent. In such cases, the receiver as a rule has to repeat them often before the realization comes.

‘The initial potency of the word can be increased by the receiver by repeating and meditating on it with earnestness and faith. The potency must be sufficient to bring about the realization and one has to practise hard and long to work it out. One’s task becomes easy or difficult as the initial potency is great or small.

‘When communicating the force to a word, the teacher feels that spiritual force is going out of him. When you received the word from me, I lost the spiritual force of ten years’ *brahmacharya*.

‘Earnestness and faith are the things needful. They are, as it were, the water to nourish the seed of the spiritual potency of the word. Without them, the receiver will repeat and meditate on the word his whole life without effect.

‘One must be intensely earnest to see God. Not one in a million really longs to see Him. Suppose there is a thief in a room and somehow he comes to know that there is a mass of gold in the next room. It is night. There is only a very thin partition between the rooms. What will the condition of that thief be? He will not be able to sleep at all. His brain will be actively thinking of some means to get at the gold. He will think of nothing else.

‘Do you believe that a man really wants to see God and does not go mad, like the thief, in his struggles to reach Him? He is the mine of infinite bliss; to reach Him ought to be the one end and aim of life. The joys of this world are nothing compared with the joy of God-vision. Do you believe that a man sincerely longs for God-vision and yet can attend to the affairs of the world? Men go mad after money, after name, after fame. Where is the man who goes mad after God? How much anxious you are when your son is ill! Be at least half so anxious to see your *ishta-devata*. Then if you do not see Him, come to me and I shall show Him to you.

‘Different forms of God are suited to different natures. One may have affinity with the ideally ascetic deity Shankara and another with the lovable Vishnu. The teacher gives the disciple the word symbolizing the deity suited to his nature. He is naturally attracted to Him and the realization becomes easy. Otherwise it becomes comparatively difficult.

‘Faith is not mere assent but deep conviction that leaves no room for questioning. We do not put our hand into the fire because we are unquestionably certain of its burning property. If it does not burn wood, we are unsatisfied and do not rest till we see it do so. This is perfect faith. It is of course based on direct perception and is about a perceived thing. But by continued training of the mind, a similar mental state can be brought about with respect to unperceived things.

‘And when the climax, that is, the mental state of absolute questionlessness in the existence of an unperceived thing is attained, in its wake follows its perception. In other words, perfect faith and perception are simultaneous. The word causes the realization of the signified form by gradually creating such faith in its existence in the receiver’s mind.

‘Faith develops into perfection through various stages of growth. The disciple must learn to have intense faith in the efficacy of the word. Every time he repeats the word, let him expect the realization as he expects the burning of his hand if put into the fire—this is one of the ways to develop faith. Mere expectation will be raised by degrees to more and more certainty and, last of all, to perfect faith.

‘Have faith that a stone is God and you will see God in it. We have faith that Brahman is the world and we see the world. Have faith that the world is Brahman and you will see Brahman. All spiritual practices end in faith. He realizes at once, who has faith for a moment.’

—A Sannyasin

### The Purity of Ganges Water

Careful experiments have shown that the river Ganges possesses extraordinary and inexplicable antiseptic properties. A Government analyst took water from the main sewer of Benares which contained millions of cholera germs. When it was mixed with Ganges water, in six hours they were all dead. He then took undeniably pure water and threw a few of these cholera germs in. They propagated and swarmed. The tests were tried repeatedly.

—from ‘News and Notes’

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# The Embodiment of Divine Grace

SWAMI ADISWARANANDA

## The Marriage of Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother

It was 1858. Sri Ramakrishna, then 22 and an unknown priest at the Kali Temple of Dakshineswar, was engaged in the severest forms of spiritual austerities: eating the leavings from the leaf plates of the poor people who had been fed at the temple; sweeping and washing the place where the poor people had been fed; feeding a cat with the food that was intended for offering to Mother Kali, seeing the cat as the Divine Mother Herself; prostrating before fallen women, seeing the Mother in them; sometimes reeling in ecstasy and sometimes lost in samadhi for hours at a time; discarding his sacred thread in order to free himself from brahminical pride and all bonds of caste. People around Sri Ramakrishna thought that the priest had become insane due to excessive thinking of God. News of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual madness spread and eventually reached Kamarpukur, his native village, where his mother Chandramani Devi lived. Sri Ramakrishna's mother persuaded him to come to Kamarpukur. She then consulted other family members and came to the conclusion that marriage would be the only remedy for her son's condition. A search for a suitable girl began, but nowhere could such a girl be found. Then Sri Ramakrishna himself told everyone that there was a girl in the next village who was the one he was meant to marry. The marriage took place, but instead of removing his spiritual madness, marriage only intensified it a thousandfold. The little girl who set off this storm of spirituality in Sri Ramakrishna was Sarada, known later as the Holy Mother. Mother was born in 1853, married Sri Ramakrishna when she was five, came to Dakshineswar to stay with her God-intoxi-

cated husband at 18, was nearly 33 when Sri Ramakrishna passed away, and lived thereafter for thirty-four years. She lived for eighteen years after the passing away of Swami Vivekananda.

## Mother Sarada, the Awakener of Souls

Holy Mother is not a borrowed light. She is a rare spiritual personality who towers very high in the realm of spirituality. She is a powerful inspiration to many and is literally worshipped by millions in India and abroad. She did not write or preach. She just lived her life, setting an example for us to follow. By a mere look, touch or wish she transformed sinners into saints. Sri Ramakrishna was a leaping flame of spiritual realization and Holy Mother was a steady glowing fire of God-consciousness. To Sri Ramakrishna, she was the Goddess of Wisdom in human form. To her disciples she was Mother Divine Herself. To her devotees she was a more real mother than their own earthly mother. To the seekers of truth she was the final word, and to sinners she was the last refuge.

## In the Company of the Master

Holy Mother was with the Master for fourteen years. The Master looked upon her as his spiritual companion, helper in his earthly mission, advisor, guide and disciple. But deep inside he regarded her as Mother Kali Herself. Far above the reach of carnal desires, the two lived the purest lives of free souls, one the counterpart of the other. She was the Master's second form. Mother's spiritual eminence was manifested even when she was a little girl in the village. Her love and compassion were all-engulfing. By her love she conquered everybody. Her compassion flowed not only to

humans but also to animals, be they cats, birds or calves. Mother said, 'He is unfortunate indeed who does not feel my compassion. I do not know anyone, not even an insect, for whom I do not feel compassion.' She was the embodiment of the Master's message of the motherhood of God. Motherhood represents grace, compassion and love. Sri Ramakrishna brought his long years of austerity and spiritual practice to consummation by his worship of the Mother Divine in the body of Holy Mother.

### Why Marriage for the Master?

It is a puzzle to many why Sri Ramakrishna, whose life-breath was renunciation, whose glory was the conquest of lust and gold, and who regarded all women as so many forms of the Divine Mother, ever got married? No event in the life of a God-man is without significance. Through his marriage Sri Ramakrishna set the example of an ideal householder. He proved that married life is not antagonistic to God-realization. He sanctified the institution of marriage, which had been tarnished by sensuality. Through his marriage the Master gave the greatest honour to womanhood. Among the God-men of history, some did not marry, some renounced their wives, and some shunned women. Holy Mother exemplified the state of *sthitaprajna* (steady wisdom) of the *Bhagavadgita*. A person of *sthitaprajna* is a knower of the Self, but does not wear any outward mark of holiness, just as birds do not leave any footprints in the sky and fish do not leave any trail in the water. Holy Mother lived among people of worldly nature—her relatives and others—yet her purity, compassion and love overwhelmed all. Wherever she went she carried heavenly bliss and showered that bliss on everyone who came near her.

### Holy Mother's Austerities

Sages and saints practise austerities in mountain caves, deserts and other remote places. Sri Ramakrishna himself practised unheard-of austerities. Holy Mother did not go to any mountain or desert for austerities, but what she practised in everyday life is beyond human imagination. Practices of the severest austerities pale into insignificance when compared with the privations and difficulties she underwent throughout her life.

In Dakshineswar she lived twenty-four hours a day confined within a small octagonal room, the maximum distance between walls being less than eight feet, with no windows (there were only two ventilators), and a door

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just over four feet high and two feet wide. She remained there all the time or on the narrow verandah around the room that for privacy was screened off with bamboo mats, which cut off the sun and fresh air. On the east side of the veranda was a staircase leading upstairs. Under the stairs she had her kitchen. She never went anywhere outside for recreation. Serving the Master day and night was her worship. The same austerity continued in a house at Shyampukur, to which Sri Ramakrishna moved when he left Dakshineswar for medical treatment. Here Holy Mother had a small room next to the Master's room, but from before three o'clock in the morning and until all others had retired for the night she stayed in a small covered space that was part of a stair-

well on the way to the roof, where she meditated and did everything for the Master. At the Cossipore garden house, where Sri Ramakrishna moved after living for about two months at Shyampukur, Mother lived in a small, almost windowless room, spending every moment in the service of Sri Ramakrishna.

After the Master's passing away, and following an extended pilgrimage to Vrindaban and other holy places, Mother came to live in Sri Ramakrishna's native village of Kamarpukur. The Master had told her to stay there by herself and not to stretch out her hand to others for anything. He said, 'Grow some greens, eat boiled rice and greens, and repeat Hari's name.' But now with the Master gone, things took a different turn for Mother. Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples were in their wandering days, and had no idea of the difficulties she faced. Mother was almost forgotten by the devotees. Her relatives and neighbours were hostile to her. Her garment was a mere rag. On some days she did not have money even to buy salt for her plain rice. An allowance of seven rupees a month she had been receiving from the authorities of the Kali Temple at Dakshineswar was abruptly stopped when one of her relatives advised them that she did not need it. Only 'M' (Mahendranath Gupta), the chronicler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, used to send her a small sum of money each month for her needs—he was the only person to whom Mother would write for anything she required. So she had to contend with the merciless and restrictive social customs for a brahmin widow, the hostility of relatives, dire poverty and the indifference of the devotees. She now and then had visions of Sri Ramakrishna and these made her suffering somewhat bearable. Eventually word of Mother's plight reached her mother, Shyamasundari Devi, in Jayrambati, and she sent word to one of her sons who lived in Calcutta. He informed a devotee. Soon other disciples of the Master were informed, some money was sent to Mother with the fervent request that she come

to Calcutta. Holy Mother went to Calcutta in April 1888.

In contemplating the hardships to which Holy Mother was subjected, we may recall an incident in the life of St Teresa of Avila. Once while very ill, St Teresa was trying to cross a river by swimming, with a number of other nuns. One after another they followed Teresa into the icy water. In midstream a wave overpowered her and swept her down the river. She did not scream, she was not frightened, she merely asked the Lord in her need, 'O Lord, why do you put such difficulties in our way?' The Lord appeared over the water and replied, 'It is thus I treat my friends.' And Teresa, never at a loss for an answer, said, 'Ah my Lord, that is why you have so few.'

Holy Mother silently bore everything. Against the dark background of sufferings, her radiant figure stood out more brightly. Through her patience and forbearance she demonstrated the mastery of her will over human frailty. In the extraordinary life of Holy Mother natural events crossed over into supernatural spheres, and worldly and heavenly realms met. Later, circumstances really improved for Holy Mother when Swami Vivekananda, through his letters from America, reminded everybody of her. In one letter, he wrote:

Let Ramakrishna disappear, that does not frighten me. But it will be a calamity if people forget Mother. ... Don't be angry with me. None of you has understood Mother. Her grace upon me is one hundred thousand times greater than that of the Master. ... About Mother I am a little fanatic. I can do anything if she gives the order. I shall give a sigh of relief when you purchase a piece of land and install this living Durga there. ... Brother, when I think of Mother, I say to myself, 'Who is this Ramakrishna?' I say this because of my fanaticism. Whether Ramakrishna was God or man—you may say whatever you like. But, brother, shame upon him who is not devoted to Mother.

Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897. The land on which

the present Belur Math stands was purchased in Holy Mother's name. Once a disciple asked her, 'If the Master is God, then what are you?' 'Who else am I?' the Mother replied without any hesitation. 'I am Bhagavati, the Divine Mother of the Universe.'

### **Holy Mother's Love for All**

Mother became the power, scripture, inspiration, joy and guiding spirit of the Ramakrishna Order. She prayed to Sri Ramakrishna, 'Master, those who renounce everything in your name, please give them shelter and protection.' Up to her last moment she remained as the second form of Sri Ramakrishna, distributing the blessings and grace of the Master to all. She took the responsibility of countless souls who came to her for solace, assured them that their liberation was certain, and gave them fearlessness. 'Those who are my children are already free,' she said. 'Even Providence cannot send them to hell.' Overriding the injunctions of the scriptures, she stated, 'In this Kaliyuga mental sin is no sin. Free your mind from all worries on that score.

You need not be afraid.' Emphasizing japa, she remarked, 'Practise japa. Through that you will achieve everything.' She consoled weak devotees and disciples with the words, 'Do as much as you can do and the rest I will do.' To the disciples she often said, 'Whenever you are in danger or in trouble, remember that you have a mother.' 'Do not be afraid, the Master is behind you, and I am too as your mother.' Assuring a disciple that he would always have her affection, she said, 'Yes, my child, in my love there is no ebb tide or flood tide.'

Yet Holy Mother was human to the core; she shared the joys and sufferings of all and wept bitterly when Sister Nivedita died. With the innocence of a little girl she had a fear of

ghosts, was perplexed at machines, mingled with everybody, and even when not well she did japa for hours at a time for the welfare of her disciples. 'If you want peace, make the whole world your own,' she said. 'In the fullness of spiritual realization, a person finds that the God who resides in his heart resides in the hearts of all—the oppressed, the persecuted, the lowly and the untouchable. This realization makes one truly humble.' 'Forgiveness is a great religious austerity. There is no higher virtue than forbearance.' 'If you want to succeed, seek divine grace.' 'The goal of life is God-realization and the way is self-surrender.' 'Whoever surrenders himself to God is saved.' 'Behave according to the time, place and person.' 'One who has renounced every-

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thing for God is a living God.' 'Those who surrender to the Master, he always stands behind them.' 'Even the injunctions of destiny are cancelled if one takes refuge in God. Destiny strikes off with its own hand what it has fore-ordained for such a person.' Holy Mother tried to fulfil the requests of all her disciples, no matter how unusual or demanding these were. No one went away disappointed. 'How will you understand the sufferings of the afflicted?' she said to a monk who poked fun at some of the unusual requests, 'You are not a mother.'

The monastic disciples of Sri Ramakrishna would hesitate to come and see her, because in her presence they would be overwhelmed with spiritual emotion, especially

Swami Brahmananda, who would shake due to his spiritual fervour. Holy Mother looked upon the Master's disciples as incomparable. She referred to Naren (Swami Vivekananda) as 'my all', to Rakhal (Swami Brahamanda) as 'the visible Narayana' or 'my son in a special sense', to Baburam (Swami Premananda) as 'my very inner soul', and to Yogen (Swami Yogananda) and Sarat (Swami Saradananda) as 'members of my inner circle'.

She regarded renunciation as the foundation of spiritual life, and would say, 'With whom shall I live but with those who have renounced the world for the sake of God?' Once Mother's attendant, Golap Ma, found fault with a young novice monk and threatened to leave Mother's house unless he left. 'Let her leave if she likes,' said Holy Mother. 'She is, after all, a householder. The novice has given up everything in order to serve me.'

Mother set examples in all her dealings with others, never forgetting that she was a woman. She was the nurturing mother to her disciples, tolerant and indulgent older sister to her much younger brothers, teacher of household arts to her sisters-in-law, affectionate aunt to her nieces and nephews. She mediated disputes, made arrangements, looked to the needs of everyone and gave motherly love and material things almost endlessly. Women devotees felt at home with her, seeing her as one of them. But through it all she remained unattached and at will she would see the world around her as unreal and be brought back to her true divine nature.

### The Uniqueness of Holy Mother

Holy Mother demonstrated in her life how to live as an ideal wife. She served her husband Sri Ramakrishna selflessly in every way up to his last days, and never placed any physical demands on him. Again, though living in the world, she lived as a nun. She once said that even a bad thought had never crossed her mind. In reply to the question

'What is the aim of life?' Mother said, 'To realize God and to be absorbed uninterruptedly in His consciousness is the aim.' Holy Mother lived that literally. Above all she was Mother, tending to her disciples' needs, physical, mental, spiritual, and never expecting anything in return. She was their teacher who made their path clear and certain, she the Divine Mother who granted them liberation, and at the same time she was their mother who looked after them, wept with them in sorrow, laughed with them in joy, and accepted them as they were. Those who came to her and wholeheartedly called her 'Mother' received more than they deserved.

Up to the last moment of her life, Holy Mother granted sacred initiation to all the devotees who came to her and set them free. She unhesitatingly took the sins of all upon herself. This burden of sins eventually brought her intense physical suffering and illness. After a long illness, she passed away on 21 July 1920. Yet, her passing away is not the end of the story. In her invisible form she continues to give her blessings, even today, to anyone who accepts her as the real Mother and surrenders to her. Holy Mother Sarada is our 'real Mother', not 'an adopted mother, nor a vague mother.' Our *real* Mother. \*

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# The Spotless Autumnal Moon—Sri Sarada

C S RAMAKRISHNAN

**I** used to pray in the moonlit night: O Lord! Let my mind be like the full moon, unblemished. There is a stain even in the moon. Let there be no stains in my mind.' — Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi

Mahavakyas demand very careful study. Their subtlety calls for deep insight. Very often they are in the form of oxymorons, wherein contraries lie cheek by jowl. Take the famous '*Tat tvam asi*' of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, for instance. It seems to assert that there is no difference between us and God: the puny jiva is non-distinct from the infinite Brahman. The assertion sounds puerile at first. But when we dive deeper we are amazed to find that at bottom there is only one Reality, call it Atman or Brahman, it does not matter. The apparent differences on the surface fade away, yielding place to the profundity of the 'Singular which has no plural'. When we realize the Atman-Brahman identity the scales fall from our eyes, a tremendous energy courses through our mortal frame and we feel blessed beyond words.

## Her Uncommon Commonness

It is against this background that we must go into some of the sayings of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. She herself was a super-oxymoron. She looked a very ordinary peasant woman of rural Bengal, labouring from morn till night at domestic chores, and running a family of men and women who are best described as veritable pains in the neck. Yet she was worshipped by the Paramahansa himself as the Mother of the Universe, and when the Great Master passed away his mantle as the Jagadguru fell on her shoulders. Monks and householders came to her in throngs to get peace of mind and spiritual em-

powerment. And if today the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission is internationally noted for its selfless humanitarian and spiritual activities the credit must go to Sri Sarada Devi, who guided the movement in the earlier days with a smoothness of expertise that is a wonder. It is on record that when one of her sevaks protested that she, the Divine Mother, was going about like a common woman, her reply was stunning, 'My child, try to find another common woman like me.' Her commonness was nonpareil, it was uncommon beyond compare.

## Her Charming Last Message

What is usually cited as Mother's last message contains a charming dichotomy that challenges our understanding. Five days before Mother's mahasamadhi an old lady devotee expressed her fears about the future. Mother told her, 'Why do you fear? If you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child. The whole world is your own.'

This mahavakya presents two revolutionary propositions: a) do not find fault with others, b) the whole world is your own. Both appear to be statements that common sense cannot readily accept. They call for deep psychological probing. But when studied deeply they yield a truth that can marvellously transform our very personality.

Atmanepada, *not* parasmaipada: 'Do not find fault with others.' How is it possible? People commit mistakes, consciously or unconsciously. If it is a conscious mistake, the offender must be chastised. Through words or facial expression he must be pulled up and, if

necessary, punished as well. The mistake must be corrected and the offender made to realize that the error should not be repeated. If, on the other hand, the mistake has been committed through carelessness and not deliberately, even then the fault has to be pointed out and the offender encouraged to avoid repetition of the mistake. Only, he will have to be handled more gently—mailed fist in velvet glove. The other should be educated and not hurt. The aim is to win his willing cooperation.

What Mother prescribes, however, goes far beyond this. She is not discussing whether the mistake is a conscious or an unconscious one. Nor is she concerned about the responsibility of the offender. She is focusing on the impact that fault-finding has on ourselves.

***Mother is focusing on the impact that fault-finding has on ourselves.***

***Fault-finding, according to her, is a verb not in parasmaipada, but in atmanepada—an action impinging not so much on the other as on our own self. The fault-finder hurts himself.***

Fault-finding, according to her, is a verb not in *parasmaipada*, but in *atmanepada*—an action impinging not so much on the other as on our own self. The fault-finder hurts himself.

How are we able to find a fault? Because we are familiar with that fault, we can recognize the fault. How do you say an object is red? Because you know the red colour. To a colour-blind person nothing is red.

You can identify a fault, therefore, because that fault is already in you. What is found outside is but a projection of what is inside. So real fault-finding is not so much locating a fault in another as recognizing the fault that has become part and parcel of yourself. When you note a fault in another you really have an opportunity to examine your own in-

ner being and check on a fault within you that you might not have even dreamt was there.

That is why Mother says politely, sweetly, 'Rather see your own faults.' She is not inviting us to an exercise of fault-finding. On the contrary, she is giving us a sure strategy to get over the degenerating habit of fault-finding. As soon as we detect a fault in another we should, in a flash, realize that we are suffering from that fault which has been lying low within us so long. Once we recognize our own fault, it becomes easy for us to dissolve it away. We can do it quietly and totally. When we get rid of our own pet fault we can deal with the other's fault wisely. Whatever corrections the situation calls for we can carry out with aplomb. If the situation is not amenable to correction we can walk away from it. And if both these paths are not open we can accept the situation completely without judging or evaluating it (*cintā-vilāpa-rahitam* —*Vivekachudamani*, 24).

**Self-surrender:** Accepting a situation completely means *śaraṇāgati* or surrender unto the Divine. With our very limited intellect we cannot find an adequate reason for everything that happens. The only one who has knowledge of the totality of a situation is God. Hence leaving the result to the Divine is not a sign of helplessness, but of unshakable conviction that He will never make a mistake, He has no selfish will of His own, and whatever He ordains is good. Self-surrender is not escapism but the firm faith that in His hands we command the highest security.

To see this philosophy in action we have only to look at various incidents in the life of Holy Mother. Many of her Calcutta devotees for instance were accustomed to morning tea; but in the Sleepy Hollow of Jayrambati milk was not readily available. Mother did not find fault with the devotees or the situation. She

begged sufficient milk from various neighbouring houses and did the tea-serving mela. Mother was only looking after her children. Again a tiny tot, the child of a devotee, might soil a mat. She would cleanse not only the child but also quietly clean up the mat and the place. If the devotee protested, Mother would ask, 'Who else will look after my own child?' If a lady devotee left behind a sari Mother would wash and dry the sari and send it to the devotee on the road through a sevak. Instances can be multiplied galore to show how Mother never found fault, but accepted all situations as Thakur's will.

*Near and Distant Vision:* The second admonition, 'the whole world is your own', again is a splendid example of Mother's insight and wisdom. She is stressing the need for *samadarśitva*, equality of vision. But again we may protest, how can all be equal? In the world do we not see each object as different from every other object? The answer is two-fold. The differences are obvious only to near vision, the myopic vision. Distance lends equality to the view. From the top of a mountain all the trees in the valley far below look equally tall. The other way of explanation is that equality does not mean uniformity, but it implies unity. Our five fingers are not equal in length but they find unity in constituting the hand. The different parts of our body look different and perform different functions but all are equal in being parts of the same body. You do not say you like the leg better than the hand.

*Unity in diversity:* To find the unity in the diversity is real wisdom. Sri Ramakrishna by his thoroughly scientific experiments with a variety of faiths proved that all religions sincerely pursued lead to the same Reality. He

was the prophet of the harmony of religions. His spiritual consort, Sri Sarada Devi, excelled him by proving that not only in religion but also in the conduct of everyday life there can be marvellous harmony, perfect equality of vision. Again instances are plenty. To the Muslim mason and part-time dacoit, Amjad, she would serve food with her own hands and at the end remove his leaf plate and clean the spot. When her relations protested that she

***Sri Ramakrishna was the prophet of the harmony of religions. Sri Sarada Devi excelled him by proving that not only in religion but also in the conduct of everyday life there can be marvellous harmony, perfect equality of vision.***

would lose caste, her declaration was stunning. 'Amjad is as much dear to me as Sarat', the venerable Secretary of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. For her there was no difference between a sinner and a saint. Similarly in those hectic days of the Swadeshi movement she wanted to present to her relatives some fine Manchester mull. The sevak protested against the purchase of foreign cloth. Mother's repartee was, 'Those in the Manchester mills are also my children.'

From her divine height Mother could see all persons at all places as equally her children. No one was a stranger to her. She had made the whole world her own.

\* \* \*

Our greatest tribute to Mother, therefore, is to adopt in our personal lives these two principles: not finding fault and looking on all everywhere as our own. A tall order, no doubt, but practice makes perfect. \*

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Whenever you are in trouble, remember that you have a Mother. —Holy Mother

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# Learning 'Soft Skills' from the Life and Message of Holy Mother

DR SUMITA ROY

When we begin to contemplate the personality of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, the immaculate consort of the Great Master Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, we are usually led to concentrate on the tremendous spiritual significance conveyed by the incidents in her life and the wonderful spiritual precepts that are available in her every recorded word. Consequently we say that the way to acquire a constant mindfulness and God-consciousness can be learnt from Mother's life. It is easy to say this but when it comes to emulating it and allowing it to percolate into actual experience, the difficulties are immense. What we need is to see some concrete pointers to guide us on this path, where the secular and the spiritual find a comprehensive balance. In the short introduction to the *Gospel of the Holy Mother* we read that 'the Master took pains to make the Holy Mother efficient in both spiritual and secular matters, and prepared her for the great mission that he was to entrust to her at the close of his life.'<sup>1</sup>

## Soft Skills to Make Life Meaningful

Therefore, in any reading of Mother's life and message, instead of restricting ourselves to mere elevated theoretical ideals, however impressive they may be, we need to supplement these with practical directions, accurate road maps to help us traverse the unfamiliar terrains of this trek we call life. Since this pragmatic dimension is one area that we could concentrate upon, it would be interesting to see how Mother teaches us lessons on 'soft skills'.

The buzzword 'soft skills', which has been making its rounds everywhere as representative of some of the most coveted qualities

needed by a person who aims at achieving anything worthwhile—peace, prosperity, plenty; in other words, success in any field of endeavour—has snared many. Since some of the most crucial aspects of spirituality are efficiency at the level of our daily activities, fulfilment of duties and training of the mind not to be too deeply involved in the mundane dimension of existence, 'soft skills' give us a value orientation that helps make life meaningful. And the magnitude of Mother's role in this can be gauged by the fact that she fits into every mould that our perception of her can create.

## Her Message Eternally True

The greatness of Holy Mother's life and message is, thus, not restricted by any temporal or spatial boundaries. It is relevant to and revelatory for all times and climes. What was true in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is equally so in the twenty-first century. Mother comes alive through application of her words and deeds to newer parameters arising out of the changing global scenario with the passage of time and appears more and more efficacious as human perspectives keep altering from generation to generation. Such a live, vibrant, moving life and message with its endless variety to suit all the needs of different temperaments and situations is indeed one of the supreme wonders of our beloved Holy Mother. Reading and contemplating upon this is itself sadhana of the most satisfactory variety.

Holy Mother seems to suit exactly the metaphoric picture of Sri Ramakrishna's ideal of what a mother should be: she cooks fish, but

does not prepare the same dish for all her children. She keeps in mind the palate of each of her children and also their digestive ability while serving them with what is best suited to each. Holy Mother likewise prepares for us the fish curry of spiritual nourishment and practical instructions but she does it in such a way that we can not only absorb and assimilate it, but also enjoy the dish being served and thus combine the didactic with the aesthetic.

### Remembering God amid Life in the World

In a word, both Mother's and the Master's message that God-realization is the only goal of human existence and their lives bearing the best testimony to how this can be achieved, have further ramifications that fill not only those hours of our day devoted to inward disciplines, but also all the rest of the time when we are engaged in responsibilities associated with the task of living. While we hold on to God with one hand, we are also compelled to perform with the other hand our duties in the world. We are told to rub the oil of God-realization on our palms and then cut the jackfruit of the world so that its juice of worldliness does not stick to us.

That is to say, there is no escape from living in the world, and real spiritual strength is our ability to live efficiently and effectively in this difficult sphere without getting totally bogged down by it. As Mother herself said, 'Can anyone think of God all the time?' (215) This rhetorical question makes it clear that both by performance and by precept Holy Mother has taught us the way in which we should spend our time: 'Spend some time relaxing and some time absorbed in thoughts of Him,' she said. (215)

This crucial injunction is extremely significant when we look at the complicated experiences of an average human being in pres-

ent-day life. However stupendous may be the advance of knowledge, technology and the ensuing information revolution, there is a strong sense of dissatisfaction in people who supposedly have everything they need to be 'happy'. But happiness is more elusive today than it may have been any time before. So even when we have a firm foundation of knowledge in our specific area of specialization, we seem to lack what is termed today as 'soft skills' and 'life skills' which invest all our experiences and activities with meaning.

### Stress Management

For instance, Mother's famous words on the way to acquire peace of mind are a wonderful help in the process of stress management. Stress is an almost inevitable and inher-

***Stress is an almost inevitable and inherent part of life today. Even the mind that has been controlled by long practice does sometimes become prey to this malady. Then Mother's memorable words come to the rescue.***

ent part of life today. Even the mind that has been controlled by long practice does sometimes become prey to this malady. Then Mother's memorable words come to the rescue. If we want peace of mind, we should not find fault with others, she tells us repeatedly. And she shows it also by her own example. She never indulges in criticizing anyone and forgives the worst mistakes of those around her. Again and again she emphasizes by word and deed that most of our stress is due to this almost inescapable quality of fault-finding, which seems to be programmed into our very being. Only if we are able to overcome it by concentrated effort, we shall get rid of the negative stress or *distress*, as it is technically called. And this, according to her, is synonymous with peace of mind, the most coveted goal that

we can set for ourselves.

Mother has told us in no uncertain terms that it is impossible to live a perfectly joyous life. The mind by its very nature gets disturbed and depressed. What causes stress in these circumstances is the worry which comes in the wake of experiences we cannot accept or appreciate. She says, 'Joy and sorrow, where will they go? They are our companions. Why should you worry about it?' (246-7) In such a simple and direct manner she puts an end to the root cause of stress, which is worry. The implication here is clear: it is no use worrying about sorrow. Our worry does not lessen sor-

these structured situations of conflict which Mother resolved effortlessly. She was supposedly unlettered but her manner of handling tricky situations spoke of a native intelligence, empathy with all people and an inward strength that helped her in any crisis or conflict. Many are the instances where she would go to the root of the crisis, look at it from all points of view, and with a flexible, non-partisan and compassionate attitude, solve the problem at hand. Even as a child Mother assumed the role of 'peacemaker among her playmates'.<sup>2</sup> Once she said about a woman, 'She imposes very strict discipline upon her daughter-in-law. She should not go to such excess. Though she has to keep an eye on her, she should also give her a little freedom. She is only a young girl. Naturally she likes to enjoy some nice things. If the lady becomes overstrict, she may go away from her or even commit suicide. What can she do

then?'<sup>3</sup> Such liberal injunctions are very beneficial for resolving conflicts through mutual understanding. And their potential to teach those who are rigid in laying down rules for others is invaluable.

### Negotiation Skill

Unlike conflict resolution, the skill of negotiation helps circumvent situations, thus pre-empting a crisis. Mother has shown instances of negotiation in many recorded instances. Once she was asked to give an opinion about the guru of some devotees who came to see her. She refused because she believed that none should doubt or criticize someone's guru. Finally when they compelled her to say something she did so reluctantly, saying, '... you have forced me to say ...' and refuted the rulings of their guru without willingly wanting to denigrate him. (20) Another instance was when Mother spoke highly about the devotion of a man to his mistress, a

***She was supposedly unlettered but her manner of handling tricky situations spoke of a native intelligence, empathy with all people and an inward strength that helped her in any crisis or conflict.***

row. If we worry we only create further physiological and psychological problems for ourselves, instead of managing to get rid of the sorrow. Mother also says, '... misery is only the gift of God. It is the symbol of His compassion.' (36) Such an injunction may be difficult, almost impossible to accept initially, but once we take it as true because Mother herself has told us so, we shall be brought to realize its invaluable efficacy.

### Conflict Management

In addition to stress management—a matter of an individual's handling of himself—there is also the art of managing conflict with others, which is a cornerstone of perfecting 'soft skills'. Often in her life, Mother was compelled to take up the task of conflict management involving people who lived with or around her. Her brothers, their wives, her niece Radhu and her mad sister-in-law, the constant family quarrels, even a neighbouring labourer beating his wife mercilessly—all

relationship which is usually looked down upon by the world as unethical. (8) Also when a married woman visited her without the necessary vermilion mark on her forehead and was questioned by someone, Mother said, 'What does it matter, if she has not? She has such a noble husband. What if she hasn't worn the mark?' (230) All these incidents show Mother's ability to lead her followers to the goal of agreement where trust is the key concept on which the success of the negotiation depends.

### Leadership Qualities

Such an anonymous and unassuming life as Mother led might make us conclude that she may not have had any qualities of leadership. It is said that many people who missed seeing her in her lifetime did so because they thought she was a mere village woman with no exceptional qualities except the good fortune of being the wife of Sri Ramakrishna. But this is far from truth because time and again we find in her a leader par excellence. She was naturally reticent and avoided coming into the limelight, but when the mantle of the Master's mission fell on her she did not hesitate to accept it. She began to give initiation only after being commanded by the Master in a vision. Then she gave initiation to many, even without strictly observing some of the so-called rules. She thus had the ability to conquer any context, which is defined as one of the most crucial qualities of a leader. Later in life she willingly became the leader not only of the teeming millions who came to her for succour but also of world-movers such as Swami Vivekananda and the other direct disciples of the Master. She believed in participatory leadership and was never authoritarian. When we read her *Gospel* we are struck by the way in which she never insists on anything as inviolate and inviolable. She suggests things gently,

often in the form of questions instead of assertions so that the listener has a choice of accepting what she suggests or rejecting it, thus making her a true leader in the best sense of the term.

### Planning and Time Management

Planning is one area on which Mother laid great emphasis. She told her disciples how the Master himself taught her the need for planning, though he also spoke about the importance of surrender. This is no paradox because to achieve total surrender is a task of superhuman effort and in the meantime life has to be lived with the help of planning and organization. Whenever Mother went on a journey the Master instructed her about planning. Yogin Ma records that before one of Mother's journeys when she went to take her

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leave of the Master, he said, 'Move cautiously. See that you don't leave behind any of your belongings in the boat or railway compartment.' (181)

An example Mother gave about the crucial role of planning has been recorded by her disciple Swami Tanmayanandaji: Mother said, 'The house may have all kinds of food-stuff for cooking, but one must cook them and take his meal. He who cooks earlier gets his meal earlier too. Some eat in the morning, some in the evening, and there are yet others who starve because they are lazy and reluctant to cook.' (314) Once when a person brought a basket of fruits, the basket was discarded when it was empty. Mother did not approve of this and said, 'But we cannot allow such a waste. We could have utilized the basket at

least for keeping the peelings of the vegetables.' (34) Then she asked someone to get the basket and kept it for future use, thus teaching a valuable lesson in planning and foresight to all who were present. Again, Mother mentions the instance where the Master gave her some hemp fibre to make suspenders for pots of sweets to be kept for his young disciples, who used to frequent Dakshineswar. Mother says, 'I made the suspenders accordingly, and with the fibre that was left, stuffed a pillow.' (60)

Planning has a specialized dimension, and that is time management. This, according to Mother, is important to make life worthwhile. She forbade her devotees from wasting time in idle chatter or laziness. She said, 'My child, time alone is the principal thing.' (128) She also said: 'In old age the body deteriorates. It does not possess any strength. The mind

***Holy Mother tried constantly to instil many good qualities such as integrity in her devotees. Integrity matters because without it there is no commitment to what is right. It also matters because it wins others' trust.***

loses its vigour. ... Whatever you want to achieve, achieve now; this is the right time.' (177)

At every turn we learn from Mother's activities how important time management was to her and how well she did it. She would get up at 3 o'clock in the morning in order to finish her bath before anyone else stirred. She would cook for numerous visitors at all times of day and night. Even when unexpected guests came to the temple she was always ready to serve them from her store of food. When in her father's house, she had many opportunities to illustrate her ability to plan, as for instance the time of the Jagaddhatri Puja, which was annually performed by her mother.

## Decision-making

Though extremely modest and unassuming, Holy Mother was never reticent about letting her stalwart spiritual children know what was in her mind. She had perfect decision-making capabilities, which she could exercise without any hesitation. On the one hand she was love incarnate, while on the other she could be stern and unyielding when necessary. At every turn her life shows her power of making the right decisions without antagonizing people. When as a young woman she heard about the so-called madness of her ascetic husband, she did not shrink from going to see for herself what the true state of affairs was. When the Master was no more, she decided to continue wearing a red-bordered sari and gold bracelets because she believed in the immortality of the soul and was in constant

communion with the Master. It is said that when Swamiji was in two minds about his historic trip abroad, he left it for Mother to decide.

## Interpersonal Skills

Holy Mother inspired people with tremendous faith in herself, simple and modest though her behaviour was on all occasions. That is to say, her interpersonal skills were marvellous. These skills are the ways in which we interact with the people whom we live and work with. When we have a comfortable relationship with them our life is worth living, otherwise maladjustment and other maladies dog our existence. As Mother's life sketch in the *Gospel of the Holy Mother* records, 'It is a remarkable thing that the Holy Mother was able to satisfy ... her exacting and quarrelsome relatives on the one hand, and the devoted spiritual seekers on the other. ... The unique spirituality of the Mother can be recognized only when one comprehends the inherent contradictions of the demands that these two situations made on her.' (xxxii)

While interacting with people, we have to take extreme care about communication, both with superiors and inferiors. Mother, we are told, 'used to respect her disciples as the manifestations of God, and at the same time show her affection to them as a mother does to her children.' (99) She never made anyone feel an outsider. Most of her disciples record how she never adhered to caste restrictions. To her all were her dear ones and she declared that devotees of God do not have any caste, which was a revolutionary statement for a woman of her background in the nineteenth century.

### Motivation

Such unbounded love of Holy Mother formed and continues to form a powerful factor of motivation. For those of us who find japa and meditation difficult, she recalls how she used to get up at 3 o'clock every morning and sit for meditation. Once she was ill and got up late. After that it became difficult for her to keep to the schedule, but with great effort she got back to her old routine. Motivation from Mother comes in the form of inspiration when we listen to her moving experiences. It stimulates us to thought and action, serves as an incentive in all the progress we make or attempt to make, and invests all we do with enthusiasm.

Mother knew well how to motivate people to give their best in whatever they undertook to do. She also knew how praise and reward were powerful motivating factors. Describing a visit of Holy Mother to their house, Sarayubala says, 'She was all praise for everything she saw and made us all immensely happy.' (28)

### Integrity

Holy Mother tried constantly to instil

many good qualities such as integrity in her devotees. Integrity matters because without it there is no commitment to what is right. It also matters because it wins others' trust. It is a cornerstone of strong character, which is not built in a day but takes an entire lifetime to consolidate. Without integrity it is impossible to establish oneself in any field of endeavour. When some women asked Mother for spiritual instruction she said, 'What shall I instruct you about? The words of Sri Ramakrishna have been recorded in books. If you can follow even one of his instructions, you will attain everything in life.' (23) Later she regretted the fact that not many people have the required commitment and integrity to assimilate genuine lessons in spirituality. She said, 'Where is that competent student who can understand spiritual instruction? First of all, one should be fit; otherwise, the instructions prove futile.' (23)

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We can continue endlessly to read and contemplate these and various other aspects of the life and message of Holy Mother and their enormous significance for us. But even when we look at only a single incident or a single message we can still spend an entire life clinging to it and making our existence worthwhile. Such is Mother's potency that a small or big dose equally helps us to go ahead in life and attain whatever goal we have set for ourselves. \*

### References

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2. Swami Nirvedananda, *The Holy Mother* (Calcutta: Sri Sarada Math, 1983), 11.
3. *Gospel HM*, 51.

**H**e who has prayed to Sri Ramakrishna even once has nothing to fear. By praying to him constantly one obtains ecstatic love, through his grace. This love is the essence of spiritual life.

—Holy Mother

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# Sri Sarada Devi—The Eternal Mother

ASIM CHAUDHURI

**S**ri Ramakrishna transformed many a life with his words. There could hardly be more significant examples of this than his fond admonitions to Swami Vivekananda and Sri Sarada Devi.

In Dakshineswar, when he was still Narendranath Datta, Swamiji's spiritual practices intensified at the feet of the Master. He became impatient for the experience of remaining immersed in a trance for a prolonged period. His goal in life was *nirvikalpa samadhi*, continuous. When Sri Ramakrishna came to know about his desire, he said to Naren, 'Shame on you! You are asking for such an insignificant thing. I thought that you would be like a big banyan tree, and that thousands of people would rest in your shade. But now I see that you are seeking your own liberation.' We all know what followed. Swamiji went on to become the phenomenal world teacher, the biggest banyan tree one could imagine, with people from all parts of the world coming under its shade for knowledge and guidance.

When Sri Sarada Devi wanted a child of her own, Sri Ramakrishna said, 'You are seeking only one child? You will have so many that it will be difficult to manage them.' We also know what happened after that. She went on to become Holy Mother to the entire world, catering to her children's various needs. One may turn the pages of the history of the world and yet not come across another case like that of Holy Mother, who embodied the institution of motherhood in all its purity and universality.

## Maintaining a Low Profile

Despite what we imagine to be our knowledge about Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, we really don't know too much

about Holy Mother. She didn't have a Boswell like 'M' to chronicle the important periods of her life; neither did she speak extensively or write to spread her message. In her early days in Dakshineswar, only a few intimate devotees had the opportunity to meet her. The situation did not change much in her later days. She was extremely shy, concealing herself within folds of cloth when appearing before her devotees. To many she was the simple and humble consort of a great saint. Her life followed a placid course of service to others, in an atmosphere of charity, contentment and compassion—all in a quiet and private manner. She went to great lengths to hide her spiritual effulgence that was brighter than a thousand suns. Those who came in contact with her never for a moment could fail to see her genuine love and affection for them, and only through their fragmented annals of personal experience do we come to know her greatness to some extent; she never divulged it herself.

## Holy Mother's Innate Greatness

Only Sri Ramakrishna knew what Holy Mother was. His direct disciples, except for Swami Vivekananda, had only a limited comprehension of her greatness. Swamiji wrote to his brother disciple Swami Shivananda from the US in 1894:

You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. ... Without Shakti (Power) there is no regeneration for the world. ... Mother has been born to revive that wonderful Shakti in India. ... What do I find in America and Europe?—the worship of Shakti, the worship of Power. Yet they worship her ignorantly through sense gratification. Imagine, then, what a lot of good they will achieve who will worship Her with all purity, in a Sāttvika spirit, looking upon Her as their Mother!

Swamiji further added in the same letter: 'Of Ramakrishna, you may aver, my brother, that he was an Incarnation or whatever else you may like but fie on him who has no devotion for the Mother.'<sup>2</sup> He would sometimes say that Holy Mother was even greater than Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>3</sup> I don't remember Swamiji's specific explanation—if he gave any—of why he thought so. One of the reasons could be the intense maternal love that characterized her spiritual ministry. While Sri Ramakrishna, for reasons beyond my comprehension, would hesitate to dispense spiritual succour to everybody who came to him, Holy Mother would grant it freely to everybody, irrespective of the worth of the receiver, for the only motive behind was her maternal love. 'Who else will bear the responsibilities of the sinner and the afflicted?' Holy Mother would say. It is her indiscriminate, unconditional and unmotivated maternal love that makes her greater than even Sri Ramakrishna.

Sri Ramakrishna would discriminate, test and select people before showering his grace on them. His direct disciples would tend to do the same, perhaps out of a fear that initiating unworthy people might have adverse effect on the teacher. Holy Mother would do no such thing. Paying tribute to the nonpareil mercy of Holy Mother, Swami Premananda once said: 'The poison which we cannot digest, we just pass on to the Mother. ... She is giving refuge to all, and digesting the sins of all.'<sup>4</sup>

Being a woman, despite her foreign extraction, Sister Nivedita was fortunate to observe Mother at close quarters. Her letters to various people reveal some aspects of Mother's innate purity and greatness that go beyond the purview of ordinary human competence to grasp. Sister Nivedita saw the image of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in her—with her white sari, bracelets and all. In spite of being terribly orthodox, she did not hesitate for a moment to welcome Sara Bull and Josephine MacLeod into her home, accept them as her

daughters and even taste food with them. Sister Nivedita once wrote to a friend:

If I ever go to prison for a prolonged period, none of my friends need grieve about it—for I shall immediately take to meditation and try to climb those wonderful heights on which the Holy Mother (Sarada Devi) lives. Such sweetness and serenity as hers, with such depth of experience and affection, are past all imagining. ... she seems more and more like the drop of water on a lotus leaf—touching the world at all points, yet undiverted by it—undeluded—filled with beatitude.<sup>5</sup>

Mother endured infinite pain as she touched the lives of many and relieved their intense sufferings. In this respect, she brought about the spirit of the man from Galilee in her life. Holy Mother's greatness became all the more manifest in the domestic setting in which she found herself after the passing away of Sri Ramakrishna. She was not a wife anymore—just a mother.

It seems if one tries to delve into her life to search for the evidence of her greatness, one would just meet with the same fate as the salt doll that ventured to fathom the sea—one would just melt away in the ever-flowing waves of her unadulterated love and affection.

### Was Holy Mother a Saint?

Various religious traditions use the concept of the 'saint' to designate individuals who epitomize the highest religious ideals. But as the concept of 'religious ideals' varies from one tradition to another, so does the saint. The Hindu tradition recognizes both—the incarnations of the divine (avatara), and human beings who are endowed with divine qualities—as saints.<sup>6</sup> Thus India has her share of saints: Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Ramananda, Chaitanya and many others. 'Additionally, mystics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Saradadevi, and Sai Baba are also recognized as saints because

***If Swamiji was the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) and Swami Brahmananda the CFO (Chief Financial Officer) of Ramakrishna Movement Inc, then Holy Mother can be aptly described as the Chairperson of the Board.***

they epitomize the divine through their personal qualities of selflessness, compassion, as well as their vision of the essential divinity of all.' (148)

Some women saints of India—like Mirabai (sixteenth century) and Janabai (thirteenth century)—lived in the realm of virtual reality. Mirabai's relationship with Sri Krishna was like that between two lovers. 'Janabai's Vitthal [Vishnu] had to become her lover, father, mother—even her child!' (171) Holy Mother was different in that she lived in the real world, a world with real people whom she accepted as her children. In the world besieged by illness, bereavement, misery and frustration, she did not feel suffocated in the least. Maybe she was totally conscious of Sri Ramakrishna's divinity and her own in her secular and spiritual life, and did not need to withdraw herself from the world to manifest that divinity. She was a saint, all right—a work-a-day or everyday saint, tidying rooms, cooking food, cleaning away leavings and scouring utensils, while constantly dispensing motherly love and affection to people she could touch.

In the five millennia of India's recorded history we can't find a woman saint whose life was as dedicated to service as Mother's was, or who epitomized motherhood as she did. In her we see the unique mingling of the commonplace with the extraordinary, of common human qualities with divine excellence.

**Holy Mother's Role  
within the Ramakrishna Order**

It is true that Swami Vivekananda organized the Ramakrishna Order. He was the

leader-steward who had given the organization its shape and form. His managerial and organizational talents were phenomenal.<sup>7</sup> But it is not common knowledge that

It was the Holy Mother who first realized the need of Sri Ramakrishna's direct disciples organizing themselves into a body for the purpose of propagating the Master's message. Though devoid of modern education and present-day ideas of planning and organized work, she was nonetheless guided towards this realization as much by her motherly heart as by her insight into the purpose of the Master's life. ... Their [the direct disciples'] tendency was to take to a life of hard *tapasya* (austerity) in secluded spots or to go about from one place of pilgrimage to another as wandering sannyasins. It was the Holy Mother who first realized the inadequacy of this ideal and prayed to the Master to consolidate his disciples into an Order of monks for the propagation of his message.<sup>8</sup>

The Ramakrishna movement and its monastic organization owe their inception and initial sustenance to this shy, simple, unostentatious, but visionary woman. If Swamiji was the CEO (Chief Executive Officer) and Swami Brahmananda the CFO (Chief Financial Officer) of Ramakrishna Movement Inc, then Holy Mother can be aptly described as the Chairperson of the Board. Swami Vivekananda never failed to consult her on important decisions.

If we look at the lives of the consorts of the traditional avatars—Sita of Rama, Radha of Krishna, Gopa of Buddha and Vishnupriya of Chaitanya—we see that they epitomized purity of character, devotion to their husbands, patience and forbearance—qualities that are regarded as essential for spiritual fulfilment. But while they served as models of dharma, their role, as far as the avatars' missions were concerned, was always secondary and passive. There was no evidence of their direct participation in the propagation of their

husbands' message before or after their husbands' tenure in this world. Not so with the consort of Sri Ramakrishna. Sri Ramakrishna entrusted her to continue and fulfil his mission after he was gone, and she religiously followed the course.

### An Enigma to the West

Of Sri Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Holy Mother, it is she who remains an enigma to the West, especially in America. Why? For several reasons—reasons rooted in the nature of the American society and its women. There is a word of caution, though: American society is highly pluralistic. It may be unfair to depict it with one broad paintbrush.

*Obsession with youth and appearance:* From his own experience in the US Swami Vivekananda said:

... the rule is that the members of this Order [Ramakrishna Order] have to call every woman 'mother'; ... that is the custom. Coming to the West, that old habit remained and I would say to ladies, 'Yes, mother', and they are horrified. I could not understand why they should be horrified. Later on, I discovered the reason: because that would mean that they are old.<sup>9</sup>

Things have not changed much in the West since then, especially in America. In this era of Botox, facelifts and makeovers to preserve the youthful look, women will be even more horrified when addressed as mother. Part of it is, in this culture youth rules.

*Egalitarian society:* Swamiji was really impressed with American women and repeatedly applauded their culture, education, generosity, spirituality and broad-mindedness. But that was in the late nineteenth century, prior to the advent of the feminist movement. In 1900, 5.6 per cent of married women in the US were employed. By 1987, that jumped to 56 per cent. The reasons for that were economic hardship in some cases, the rise of a consumer

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culture in which two pay cheques helped enhance the material standard of living, and the stress on the importance of women's self-fulfilment in an egalitarian society. Domesticity stopped being seen as an appropriate source of self-esteem. While the intent of this movement is noble, zealots run the risk of losing their souls in the pursuit of aggressive masculine standards. Western women are competing with men in all spheres of life, sometimes rather successfully, but it is doubtful if it makes them any happier.

*Motherhood secondary to wifehood:* Addressing this issue Swamiji said:

... the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first, and the mother last. The word woman calls up to the mind of the Hindu, motherhood; and God is called Mother. ...

In the West, the woman is wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there—as the wife. ... In the Western home, the wife rules. In an Indian home, the mother rules.<sup>10</sup>

If things have changed a little in some Indian homes from Swamiji's time, it is because of the Western influence.

Nothing has happened since Swamiji's time to shift the emphasis from wifehood to motherhood. Motherhood, it must be remembered, is the special privilege of women, both in the physiological and psychological sense. It is the essentially, eternally and uniquely feminine principle. A woman can be a mere housewife or a teacher or a businessperson or an engineer or a doctor. She does no violence to her nature by pursuing any of these vocations as long as she remains true to the ideal of

***But the concept of motherhood in the West is used in a narrow sense; motherly love and affection are mostly limited to one's own children whom one considers to be an extension of one's own ego.***

motherhood in all spheres of her activity expressing love, forgiveness and the spirit of service characterizing it.

The beginning of twentieth century saw an attempt to professionalize motherhood as well as housework. Scientific motherhood became the goal, and motherhood became detached from maternal instinct and became perceived as something a woman could learn.<sup>11</sup> Wifedom has something in addition to mere sex life, and that 'something' relates to motherhood. But in the present sex-oriented, materialistic Western society, women are not clamouring for that 'something'. True motherhood is losing out to wifedom. Even wifedom is in jeopardy. In 1900, one in twelve marriages ended in divorce, in 1980 one in two. Mary Ann Mason in her book *The Equality Trap* says, 'Marriage was seen as patriarchal and controlling, living together as egalitarian and liberating. Children become problematical, since they shifted the egalitarian balance. For the first time it became an accepted and even applauded choice for women to turn down motherhood.'<sup>12</sup>

*Emphasis on the external:* Assertiveness. Accomplishment. Success. Status. Upward mobility. These are common words in the American vocabulary. The West emphasizes the external rather than the internal. Active virtues like boldness, fearlessness, aggressiveness and strength are preferred to passive ones like shyness, modesty and self-effacement.

*Inability to conceive of God as Mother:* Furthermore, being a virtually male-dominated, and male chauvinistic society, the West cannot conceive of God as Mother, a woman. Rather,

women are worshipped for their youth and beauty—a totally different motivation. Although Thackeray said, 'Mother is the name for God',<sup>13</sup> he was probably influenced by the fact that he was born in Calcutta. The West also cannot conceive that it is possible for a

wife to look at her husband as her child. Sarada Devi herself had revealed that she looked upon Sri Ramakrishna in that way.

*Attachment to the material aspects of life:* People today expect physical, social, emotional and economic comfort perhaps more than any other time or place in history. They remain attached to the material world, some to a greater and some to a lesser degree but attached nevertheless, and are frequently challenged by everyday trials and temptations. In the words of an American woman, 'If only we in the West think less of the beauty, comfort and adornment of our bodies and our dwellings, much more of the nourishment of the spirit and a balanced harmony of living, there would be fewer restless neurotics among us, a higher standard of living in a truer sense.'<sup>14</sup>

*A narrow interpretation of motherhood:* It is not implied here that motherhood is becoming extinct in the Western world. It is still a highly respected institution. There are good, dedicated mothers everywhere. Recently a mother in the US spent nineteen years sitting next to her comatose son praying and hoping that he would open his eyes, and he eventually did. That's love and dedication! But the concept of motherhood in the West is used in a narrow sense; motherly love and affection are mostly limited to one's own children whom one considers to be an extension of one's own ego. 'The mothers seem to be obsessed with their own children, and seem to ignore everyone else's.'<sup>15</sup>

Now we can understand why Holy Mother would be an enigma to the West. Women there are worshipped for their youth,

beauty and sometimes a specific talent, instead of piety, purity and domesticity Holy Mother had exemplified. The West understands wifehood, it understands nunhood, but it does not understand a wife who is a nun; it cannot connect wifehood and sainthood. Holy Mother, Shakti personified, the embodiment of the Motherhood of God, will remain a puzzle to the West because they cannot visualize Godhead as a woman. It is also very difficult for the Western mind to grasp the concept of universal motherhood of the kind that Holy Mother epitomized, in which she accepted everybody as her child, regardless of age, caste, creed, race, sex and even national origin. She was a mother without being a parent.

It is Holy Mother's immaculate wifehood, nunhood, sainthood and universal motherhood the West finds difficult to identify with—and for good reasons.

### The Ideal Indian Womanhood

Holy Mother comes in the line of the greatest of the holy women of the past—Maitreyi, Gargi, Radha, Vishnupriya and the like—embodying and setting the most sublime ideal for women to follow. The norm and modality of conduct and behaviour set forth by them determined the path and goal for Indian womanhood for all time. Towards the end of his essay 'Modern India' Swamiji called upon his countrymen not to forget the paragons of Indian womanhood—Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti.<sup>16</sup> For wife, nun and mother in one, we find fulfilled in Holy Mother the ideal of all the aforementioned great women—not the veiled figures of a distant time and place, depicted in scripture and mythology, but a personality of flesh and blood, indelibly imprinted in the annals of recent history, a personality that doesn't need our pious imagination to vivify its moral and spiritual content.

Maitreyi had sought immortality. Holy Mother did not do that, but actually did much better. Staying in close touch with the grim re-

ality of the world, she dedicated her entire life to the service of her children, and achieved immortality through her own deeds. \*

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# Sarada Devi—The Gentle Power

SWAMI ATMAPRIYANANDA

## ‘Seemingly a Contradiction’

In his famous lecture ‘The Open Secret’ delivered in 1900 in Los Angeles, California, Swami Vivekananda talks about a ‘peculiar state of things, seemingly a contradiction: something which reason cannot grasp and yet is a fact’<sup>1</sup> that naturally comes about when we attempt to understand things in their reality. He goes on to explain this apparent contradiction by saying that when we take up an in-depth study of anything, knowing it to be finite, we end up by discovering that it is in fact infinite. The very study, the very analysis of the thing ‘leads us beyond our reason and we never find an end to all its qualities, its possibilities, its powers, its relations’.<sup>2</sup>

This inexplicable coexistence of the finite and the infinite in every particle of the universe, be it a tiny flower or a grain of sand, is the very nature of reality. The Infinite is peeping, as it were, through the mask of the finite, leading us to wonder if there is anything finite at all in the first place; this wonder leads ultimately to the realization that what is perceived apparently as finite is the Infinite in reality.

The relative finite appearance, which is in fact the Infinite, emerges from the infinite Absolute so that one sings in wondrous joy: ‘That (the Absolute) is Infinite; this (the relative) [too] is Infinite. From the Infinite emerges the Infinite; on the Infinite’s emerging from the Infinite, the Infinite alone remains.’<sup>3</sup> This strange mathematics of the Infinite is the guiding principle of true vision of our life and the universe. An intuitive realization of this allogical, and therefore perhaps mystical, mathematical formula of the Infinite releases us from our bondage of ignorance and makes us free.

## Synthesis as Implying Transcendence

When Swamiji qualified the contradiction by ‘seemingly’, it is obvious that the contradiction referred to is not real. It is apparent. Nature is a consistent, coherent whole. In it there is a happy harmony, a synthesis of apparently contradictory elements. Thesis and antithesis are not contradictory, but their very coming together engenders a synthesis. Nature is a perfect balance—the apparently contradictory elements are subsumed in a larger harmony in which contradictions cease. The supreme Reality or God is often defined as the Infinite and the Absolute in whom all contradictions meet and lose their ‘contradictoriness’!<sup>4</sup> It is only through this happy blend of seeming contradictions that the ultimate Reality could be described, if any description of It is possible at all through human speech and mind. This is why the Upanishads always speak of the supreme Reality in terms of contradictions: ‘It is sitting still, yet travels far; It is lying quietly, yet moves everywhere.’<sup>5</sup> ‘It is vibrating, yet there is no movement in It; It is far away, yet It is so near; It is the inner Core of everything, yet It is outside everything.’<sup>6</sup> ‘It is smaller than the smallest, yet It is larger than the largest.’<sup>7</sup> ‘From It speech along with the mind turns back, unable to reach It.’<sup>8</sup> Yet at the same time, ‘It is realized only through the mind, there is no manifoldness here at all.’<sup>9</sup> Countless such passages occur in Upanishads. These are nothing but the Upanishadic rishis’ deeply passionate, albeit imperfect, attempts at articulating the nature of the supreme Reality, which is beyond any possibility of articulation. The *Bhagavadgita* also speaks the same language of apparent contradiction when the Lord says, ‘All beings are in Me, but I am not in any of them; lo, beings are not in Me [ei-

ther]—perceive my Divine Glory!’<sup>10</sup> All the world prophets coming in the line of the ancient rishis also use this ‘contradiction statements technique’ to express the inexpressible. Swamiji, for example, with a flair for hyperbole in the typical oriental style, was fond of expressions like ‘broad as the skies and deep as the ocean’, ‘power of the lion and gentleness of the lamb’, ‘infinite extensity and infinite intensity’. Whereas Swamiji portrays the terrible aspect of the Divine Mother Kali throughout his famous poem ‘Kali the Mother’,<sup>11</sup> he talks the language of ‘contradiction’ in his other poem in Bengali, ‘Nachuk Tahate Shyama’<sup>12</sup> (translated into English as ‘Let Shyama Dance There’), putting the benign and the terrible side by side.

Synthesis of contradictions coexisting harmoniously happens through the transcendence of both. When we say that something is both this and that, ‘this’ and ‘that’ being apparently contradictory, we mean that it is neither. Thus, it is either as well as neither, both coexisting harmoniously. The meaning of such a harmonious coexistence is realized by going to a level beyond both, that is by transcendence. Sri Ramakrishna’s simple analogy is, the zeroes have meaning and value only on account of the digit one, which is in front. If the one is erased, then any amount of zeroes added will add up to mere nothing. With the one in front, the more the zeroes, the more the value. Philosophically put, all duality is void of any reality—they are mere *śūnya*. But they get transformed into *pūrṇa* with the one in front. Advaita Vedanta would declare that the zeroes are *mithyā*, while the one alone is *satya*—‘*Brahma satyam jaganmithyā*.’ Sri Ramakrishna would add a new dimension to this Advaita by interpreting the same thing thus: deriving their value because of the one, all the zeroes are in fact the *līlā* aspect of Reality, while the one is the *nitya* aspect. *Satya* and *mithyā* are thus replaced by *nitya* and *līlā*. ‘*Līlā* is real too’ is Sri Ramakrishna’s simple statement, meaning that the zeroes are certainly

real, but only with the one in front; not otherwise. *Satya* and *mithyā* are contradictory, being of conflicting natures like light and darkness: *tamaḥ prakāśavat viruddha svabhāva*, as Shankara would put it.<sup>13</sup> But if their coexistence in the world of duality is realized and interpreted as subsuming both in a *nitya-līlā* paradigm, a new vision opens up. Synthesis of thesis and antithesis is thus transcendence of both. Void and fullness (*śūnya* and *pūrṇa*), One and the many, Unity and multiplicity, Divinity and humanity, then, exist in perfect harmony, being subsumed in a higher transcendental Reality, of which they are manifestations.

Perhaps, we are now in a position to understand, howsoever infinitesimally, the wonderful life of Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother.

### **Holy Mother’s life as an Illustration of the Synthesizing and Unifying Mother Principle**

There is perhaps no other life which demonstrates in modern times the power of this synthesizing and unifying principle as that of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi. In this demonstration, there is absolutely no ‘dramatics’, no sense of ‘demonstrativeness’, but a simple, almost simplistic, self-effacement—gentle, sweet and yet tellingly powerful. Just as nature, with its supreme power of balancing apparently contradictory elements, impinges upon us quietly but powerfully, even so this unostentatious, ordinary life unknown to the gaze of this demonstrative, snobbish world, strikes a chord in our hearts as something extraordinary. Rightly therefore did Swami Abhedanandaji sing of Holy Mother as Supreme Nature (Paramā Prakriti), for she is a Supreme example in modern times of the perfect harmony of all the apparently conflicting forces: humanity and divinity, gentleness and power, infinite fortitude and indomitable courage, utter unworldliness and utmost practicality, penetrating insight into people’s innermost nature and pure innocence of a five-year-old,

absolutely self-effacing humility and unmistakable spiritual authority. Apart from Sri Ramakrishna, it was Swamiji—Mother's beloved Naren—who could divine her greatness. Among Sri Ramakrishna's disciples, he alone had the intuitive realization of her true nature and her place in Sri Ramakrishna's scheme of spiritual emancipation of the whole of humankind. It was this constant awareness of Mother's true nature and glory that saw this world-conquering hero behave like a child overflowing with reverence and love in her presence. He would prostrate full length at her feet in utter childlike abandon, his whole frame trembling with divine emotion—a sight for the gods. It was as though the mighty Himalayas was bending low in awe and reverence before a gentle power which all its might could hardly comprehend. Speaking of Holy Mother's real nature, Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Sarada is Sarasvati; she has come to impart knowledge and wisdom to people.' Swamiji said, 'Outwardly she is the gentle, sattvic Sarasvati; but inwardly, she is the terrible form of Bagala.'<sup>14</sup> The gentle, mild and forgiving mother coexisted in her with a severe, powerful and courageous warrior, a destroyer of evil. One is reminded of the charming verse in the *Durga Saptashati* which says, 'What can compare with your prowess? Where can one find [a parallel] to this beauty [of yours], most charming, [yet at the same time] striking fear in [the hearts of] enemies? O Mother, O Bestower of boons, only in you is seen, in all the three worlds, [this simultaneous and strange coexistence of the conflicting traits of] compassion at heart and relentlessness [in the merciless destruction of evil forces] in battle.'<sup>15</sup> Speaking of the nature of an Incarnation of God, poet Bhavabhuti says, 'More adamant and harder than a thunderbolt and yet more gentle and softer than a flower is the heart of Divine Beings who are not of this earth. Who indeed can comprehend or fathom their hearts?' The incident involving Harish illustrates the truth of this statement. The gentle

Mother, on this occasion, assumed a terrible form and slapped him fiercely on the face.<sup>16</sup> The Divine Mother in the form of Bagala is shown to be pressing her knee against the chest of a demon, an evil force, pulling out his tongue with one hand and killing him with a sharp sword held in the other. Not all the gentleness and mildness of the mother-heart could make her soft in regard to the all-important work of destroying evil, crushing impure and wicked forces mercilessly, for which the divine Shakti incarnates in female form.

### 'Most Wonderful Thing of God'

In an extraordinary letter to Holy Mother, which is more a piece of poetry than a simple letter, Sister Nivedita wrote:

Surely you are the most wonderful thing of God—Sri Ramakrishna's own chalice of His Love for the world—a token left with His children, in these lonely days, and we should be very still and quiet before you—except indeed for a little fun! Surely the 'wonderful things' of God are all quiet—stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and the sunlight and the sweetness of gardens and of the Ganges, these are silent things like you!<sup>17</sup>

These wonderful things of nature are all quiet and silent. Why so? Because they are just content to *be*—and give themselves away in quiet and joyous abandon. The roar of the waterfall is its joyous cry for being able to give itself away fully by falling freely. That the supreme Purusha is engaged in a cosmic sacrifice, *virāt* yajna, is the content of the 'Purusha Suktam' of the Vedas.

That naturalness is the chief characteristic of nature is perhaps tautology. If our ordinary nature is so, how much more would Supreme Nature (Paramā Prakriti) be! A sweet naturalness, spontaneity of thought and action, permeated Holy Mother's behaviour at all times. Her utterances, judgments, reactions to situations, were all deeply tinged by this quality of spontaneity. There was never a premeditated, calculated thought or action: no

clever tact, no planning, no self-projection. Springing from her amazing spontaneity, they were therefore perspicuous and authentic. Her love was a gentle and natural expression of this authenticity. Hence it was the most powerful and oftentimes devastatingly energy-packed, capable of destroying all evil and impurity. The secret or key to this was her absolute and unconditional dependence on and surrender to the divine supreme Power, whom she identified with Sri Ramakrishna. She always thought and acted as an instrument in his hands. She was *always* connected to that great Source of spiritual Power. Her razor-sharp intelligence emanating from that Source, her stateliness of personality, sweep of understanding capable of giving spontaneously unerring decisions in highly complex situations—all these traits made her the uncrowned Empress of the just established Ramakrishna Mission. She steered its destiny through troubled waters for more than two decades. Sri Ramakrishna must certainly have had this divine purpose in mind when he commissioned her to take charge of the spiritual ministration after his passing away. In fact, he said, 'You would do much more than I did.' To the spiritual and administrative giants of the Mission who were at the helm of its affairs, she was the rock on which the Kingdom of God, the Ramakrishna Mission, was being built. Spiritual heroes like Swamis Brahmananda, President, and Saradananda, Secretary, became like little innocent children in her divine, gentle, powerful presence. Swamiji becoming overwhelmed in her presence with an upsurge of spiritual emotion has already been referred to.

There were at least two occasions when the gentle and powerfully spontaneous wisdom of this unsophisticated village woman overpowered and conquered even the brilliant mind of Swamiji with a floodlight of clarity: when Swamiji wanted to sell away Belur Math to find funds for plague relief, and when the spiritual hero in Swamiji wanted to rouse

his countrymen, steeped in *tamas*, through an upsurge of *rajas*, by introducing goat sacrifice in Belur Math. On both the occasions, this lion of Vedanta, the world-conquering hero, was tamed by the magnetism of her gentle power.

### A Fully Knowing Player

Spontaneity is intimately connected with non-attachment. Nature is a great example of sacrifice and detachment. What she builds up this moment with great care and beauty, be it a rainbow or a snow peak or any other natural formation of exquisite beauty, she destroys the next moment, with a smile on her lips. There is a spontaneous ease and beauty in creation as well as in destruction. Where there is calculation, planning, there is bound to be attachment. Spontaneity implies impersonality, to which non-attachment is a corollary. There is no tendency to accumulate, to hold on to, to possess. There is then no past and no future. Time, as it were, stands still as the Eternal Present. Then there is no movement in time, no accumulation resulting in psychological emptiness. This inner Void, empty of all *vāsanās* (desires) is then filled to overflowing with compassion for all. This is the chief characteristic of a free soul. Holy Mother's detachment was of this order. She played the game of life as a *fully knowing player* and therefore could never be caught unawares. There are innumerable instances in her life to illustrate this as the readers of her biography would vouch.

### Gentle Power, the Power of Sattva, More Powerful than That of Rajas

Self-effacement was her spontaneous and natural passion, as it were. Right from her Dakshineswar days when she had to live imprisoned as it were in that little space of the *nahabat*, unknown and unseen, till her later days when she was literally worshipped as the manifest Devi by innumerable devotees, she always put herself under a self-got-up veil to hide herself from anything that would smack of coming out in the open. She was always

covered with the 'veil of *hri'*, that spontaneous shying away from the 'madding crowd'. The *Gita* talks about three important qualities, among others, as divine attributes (*daivi sampad*): *mārdava*, *hri*, *acāpala*; gentleness, modesty, steadiness (absence of fickleness or frailty).<sup>18</sup> Her strength lay in her pure sattva, not claiming anything for herself, and deriving all her power from the supreme all-powerful Source whom she called 'Thakur' (Sri Ramakrishna). Her life is a lesson to the modern world that 'the strength of a lion and the gentleness of a lamb' *can* coexist in the same personality. In fact, it is gentleness that gives rise to power, it is sattva that generates strength. In the modern world with its nervous emphasis on the strength of rajas, Holy Mother's life is a glowing illustration of the power of sattva. Dazzle, noise, feverish activity and the spectacular are the characteristics of rajas. In contrast, radiance, quiet, gentle calmness and spontaneity are the hallmarks of sattva. In Nature there is no pomp, no display, no ostentation, no sense of the spectacular.

Withal, there is a manifestation of tremendous, unimaginable power. The same sun rises in the same simple manner day after day, quiet and unnoticed, be it a New Year's Day or even the beginning of a new century! But 'Man, proud man, drest in a little brief authority' blows the trumpet, beats the drum, sings his songs and dances through the night to proclaim the dawn of a new year or a new century that nature does not even care to recognize in any way, leave alone proclaim! Our lives are increasingly becoming more and more pompous, vain, luxurious, violent, competitive and aggressive. Ultimately the result is frustration, agony, depression and lack of fulfilment. The world has had enough of the violent and aggressive way of life. The time is now come to replace it with the calm, peaceful and harmonious way. 'Mankind is at one of its rare mo-

ments of shifting its outlook; revolution is not only in the air. It is in the hearts of men,' as Dr Radhakrishnan once said. For such a change-over, such a shift of outlook, it is Holy Mother Sarada Devi's life that would serve as the beacon. And the day is not far off when the gentle power of love flowing out from her heart would flood the earth, bringing joy, peace, prosperity, order and harmony to all of humankind, 'for the good the many, for the happiness of the many; *bahujana hitāya, bahujana sukhāya*,' as the Buddha said. \*

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He is blessed indeed who can love God alone. —Holy Mother

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# The Greatness of Misery

SWAMI CHETANANANDA

People generally love joyful stories with happy endings. But human life consists of happiness and misery, comedy and tragedy. Even when divine beings take human forms, they must obey this law of maya. Because happiness and misery are inevitable in human life, avatars accept this fact but are not affected by it. Most of the time, their minds dwell in their divine nature, which is above the pairs of opposites. They take human birth to teach ordinary people how to face problems and suffering, maintain peace and harmony, and experience divine bliss by leading a God-centred life.

In every age, when religion declines and irreligion prevails, avatars come to re-establish the eternal religion. But they do not come alone. They are attended by their spiritual companions. For example, Ramachandra came with Sita, Krishna with Radha, Buddha with Yashodhara, Chaitanya with Vishnupriya, and Ramakrishna with Sarada. As birds cannot fly with one wing, so avatars are accompanied by their Shakti, their female counterpart. These spiritual consorts carry the avatar's spiritual message and serve as an inspiration for others. Sita suffered throughout her life; and she taught how to forbear suffering by keeping her mind in her beloved Rama. Radha tried to forget her pain of separation from Krishna by focusing on her longing and passion for him. When Buddha left home, Yashodhara was grief-stricken. She raised their son and led a nun's life in the palace. She forgot her pain by practising renunciation and thinking of the impermanency of the world. Vishnupriya accepted Chaitanya's wish to be a monk, releasing her husband to be a world teacher. She overcame her pain by repeating God's name and worshipping Krishna.

The lives of the avatars' consorts may have been sad and painful, but their love, faith, service and self-sacrifice were praiseworthy and unparalleled. They are ideal women, made glorious by their patience and perseverance, love and purity, contentment and service, non-attachment and austerity, faith and devotion, gratitude and unselfishness, self-sacrifice and self-surrender, and other divine qualities.

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One hundred and fifty years ago Sarada was born to become the spiritual consort of Ramakrishna, the avatar of the present age. Ramakrishna married Sarada and demonstrated how one can be both an ideal sannyasin and an ideal householder. He had no physical relationship with his wife; he saw all women as the manifestations of the Divine Mother. He unveiled the real nature of Sarada, saying, 'She is Sarada, the goddess Sarasvati. She has come to impart knowledge to humanity. She is my Shakti, or power.' When we read the life story of Holy Mother Sarada, some incidents bring tears to our eyes. It is a fact. But those tears connect us with Holy Mother. We have not seen her with our physical eyes, but we have read many books on her, heard many stories from her disciples, and seen the places where she lived and the articles that she used. Walt Disney, the founder of Disneyland, once said, 'There is no end to human imagination.' Actually, imagination eventually becomes realization. Christians visualize the Passion Play, feel the pain of Christ's crucifixion, and thus experience his presence. In this article we shall try to connect ourselves with Holy Mother and feel her presence through the sad episodes in her life.

### At the Cottage in Kamarpukur

Poverty is painful, and Ramakrishna's family was very poor. When his mother, Chandramani, and his brother Rameswar heard that Ramakrishna had become mad in Dakshineswar, they brought him back to Kamarpukur for treatment and then arranged for him to marry. They desperately searched for a bride, but failed. In an ecstatic mood, Ramakrishna told them, 'It is useless to search here and there. You must go to the family of Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay in the village of Jayrambati. Fate has marked my bride with a straw.' Ramakrishna then married Sarada, Ramchandra's five-year-old daughter.

Rameswar borrowed three hundred rupees for a dowry and Chandramani borrowed some jewellery from the wealthy Laha family for the bride to wear during the wedding ceremony. It must have been a wonderful sight to see little Sarada running around in her new sari and jewellery, picking up dates from the ground.

Chandramani was extremely anxious when the time came to return the jewels to their owners. She had lovingly made the new bride her own by showing her affection. Now she needed to take the jewellery away from Sarada. This thought filled the old woman's eyes with tears. Although she expressed her agony to no one, it did not take long for Ramakrishna to perceive it. He consoled his mother; then, while Sarada was sleeping, he took the jewellery away so deftly that she was unaware of it. The items were immediately sent to the Lahas. But when the intelligent girl awoke, she asked, 'Where is my jewellery?' Chandramani

took Sarada on her lap and tearfully consoled her, saying, 'My darling, later Gadadhar will give you better ornaments than those.' The matter did not end there. Sarada's uncle came to see her that day. When he learned of this incident, he was offended and took her home at once. Chandramani was terribly hurt. To ease her pain Ramakrishna said playfully, 'Whatever they say or do, they can't annul the marriage now!'

This incident is painful to us as well. Of course, Ramakrishna later had jewellery made for Sarada. But we can visualize that sad incident when we see Holy Mother's image in the shrine, decorated with jewellery, and it melts our hearts.

### In the Fields of Jayrambati

The Banerjees' pond still exists at the entrance to Jayrambati village, and still the same kind of grass grows on its surface. We watch through our mental eye as ten-year-old Sarada wields a scythe, cutting that grass for the cows. The village pond has always been infested with leeches. We don't know how much blood those leeches sucked from her body.

Sarada was a practical village girl. Although she had very little education, she was endowed with intelligence and strong common sense. An Indian woman's life is fulfilled through four stages: as a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. Sarada was ideal in each role. As a little girl, she would carry puffed rice in a cane basket to feed the farmers who were working for her father. Once pests destroyed her family's rice crop, and she picked the rice stalks from the field. She would take

***Sarada became a victim of gossip in her own village. There is a saying, 'A funeral pyre burns only once, but anxiety burns all the time.' Fear and shame made her mute. Sarada stopped visiting her neighbours and sequestered herself in her small thatched hut.***

her younger brothers to the Amodar River to bathe and help her mother with household duties. During a famine, she served hot khichuri to starving people and fanned them with a palm-leaf fan.

Later in her life, Sarada collected milk and vegetables

for her Calcutta devotees and cooked for them. Sometimes she would shiver from malaria and suffer without murmur, lying on the mud floor of her old cottage. But as soon as she felt a little better, and could eat milk and barley, she would initiate her devotees.

These scattered scenes of Holy Mother in Jayrambati transport our minds to the realm of meditation.

### **In the Roadside Inn near Tarakeswar**

Time does not wait. Sarada gradually became a young girl of eighteen. She was extremely modest and bashful by nature, so she always tried to hide her beauty. When she would go to take her bath in the village pond, she would hear gossip about her. Some women would show her sympathy, but others would stand at a distance and point at her, commenting, 'She is a wife of a madman.' Some remarked, 'Aha! Shyama's daughter has been married to a crazy person.' Others said, 'Her husband is mad. He moves around naked and shouts, "Mother, Mother."'

This is village gossip. An American columnist nicely put it:

My name is Gossip. I have no respect for justice. I maim without killing. I break hearts and ruin lives. I am cunning and malicious and gather strength with age. The more I am quoted, the more I am believed. I flourish at every level of society. My victims are helpless. They cannot protect themselves against me because I have no name and no face. To track me down is impossible. The harder you try, the more elusive I become. I am nobody's friend. Once I tarnish a reputation, it is never the same. I topple governments and wreck marriages. I make innocent people cry in their pillows. My name is Gossip.

Sarada became a victim of gossip in her own village. There is a saying, 'A funeral pyre burns only once, but anxiety burns all the time.' Fear and shame made her mute. Sarada stopped visiting her neigh-

bours and sequestered herself in her small thatched hut. Finally she decided that she must see her husband to ease her mind.

Her journey began during the Dol Purnima (full moon of spring) festival in 1872. Some villagers were leaving for Calcutta to have a holy bath in the Ganges on that auspicious occasion. Sarada and her father Ramchandra joined a group of pilgrims. The distance between Jayrambati and Calcutta is sixty miles via Kamarpukur, Arambagh, the vast meadow of Telo-Bhelo, and Tarakeswar. She walked barefoot, her mind torn between hope and anxiety. After walking for two days her feet started to become heavy; they were covered with cuts and blisters. Then she was attacked by malaria. Ramchandra took shelter with his daughter in a roadside inn. He covered Sarada's shivering body with a chadar and left to find food and water.

Sarada herself describes what happened next:

I was lying unconscious owing to fever. ... Just then I saw a woman, pitch dark in complexion, sitting by my side. She stroked my aching head with her soft cool hands, and I felt the heat in my body subsiding. 'Where are you from?' I asked her. And she replied, 'From Dakshineswar.' At this I was speechless with wonder and exclaimed, 'From Dakshineswar! I too am going there to see my husband. But this fever has unfortunately detained me on the way.' To this she replied, 'Don't worry. You will soon be all right and see your husband at Dakshineswar. It is for your sake that I have kept him there.' ... I asked, 'Indeed! Is it so? But who are you to me?' 'I am your sister,' she replied. ... After this conversa-

***Sometimes auspiciousness lurks in inauspiciousness and goodness comes of evil. Gossip united Sarada with Ramakrishna and then departed forever. Ramakrishna removed all anxiety from Sarada's mind and installed a jar of bliss in her heart.***

tion I fell asleep.<sup>2</sup>

The next day she became free from fever.

Still feeble, Sarada resumed her journey. She and her father reached Dakshineswar at 9:00 pm. The Master received her warmly. He immediately arranged for her supper and made a bed for her in his room. He took care of her treatment the next day.

Sometimes auspiciousness lurks in inauspiciousness and goodness comes of evil. Gossip united Sarada with Ramakrishna and then departed forever. Ramakrishna removed all anxiety from Sarada's mind and installed a jar of bliss in her heart.

### At the Nahabat in Dakshineswar

There are two nahabats (concert towers) in the temple garden of Dakshineswar—one in the south, the other in the north. Ramakrishna's mother and Sarada lived in the northern nahabat, Chandramani upstairs and Sarada downstairs. Sarada's octagonal room was tiny: its length and breadth were 7'9" and height 9'3"; its door was 2'2" wide and 4'2" high. Probably Sarada was 5'6" tall, and she had to pass through that low door.

Sarada recalled:

The room was so low that at first I would knock my head against the upper frame of the door. One day I got a cut on the head. Then I became accustomed to it. The head bent of itself as soon as I approached the door. Many aristocratic women of Calcutta frequently came there. ... They would stand at the door and lean forward holding the jambs. And peeping in they would

remark, addressing me, 'Ah, what a tiny room for our good girl! She is, as it were, in exile, like Sita.'<sup>3</sup>

With our mental eyes we watch Sarada busy with her housework and forgetting herself to run to serve her husband and mother-in-law. Her forehead bumps against the door-frame, and immediately her forehead swells like a red tomato. Tears trickle from her eyes. Covering her wound with her veil and forgetting the pain, she serves her husband and mother-in-law. We become angry with the door frame and at the same time feel jealous. Addressing the door frame, we say angrily, 'You are responsible for knocking against and cutting our Mother's head. We shall cut you into pieces with an axe!' Jealous, we continue, 'Blessed you are, O door frame! You have touched our eternal Mother so many times—how unfortunate are we who could not.'

One day the Master gave Holy Mother some jute fibre and asked her to plait it into cords that could be used to hang pots in his room, to be filled with sweets for his young disciples. She made the slings, and with the rejected fibres stuffed her pillow. She slept on a hard mat under which she spread some burlap. Referring to this kind of austere bed, she later said to her devotees, 'Now I use a soft pillow and mattress. How different from the hard bed I slept on at Dakshineswar! But I slept then as well as I do now. I don't feel any difference.'<sup>4</sup> Does Holy Mother come to our minds now when we sleep in a cozy bed in an air-conditioned room?

***With our mental eyes we watch Sarada, busy with her housework and forgetting herself to run to serve her husband and mother-in-law. Her forehead bumps against the doorframe, and immediately her forehead swells like a red tomato. Tears trickle from her eyes.***

We visualize various earthen jars containing rice, lentils, farina, sugar, oil, spices and other food items on the floor around the walls, and also some pots in slings hanging from the ceiling. Sarada and Lakshmi, the Master's niece, slept on the floor in that tiny room, and sometimes some women devotees from Calcutta

were also accommodated there.

Swami Nikhilananda wrote:

Sri Ramakrishna closely watched Sarada Devi's spiritual practices and saw to it that she meditated regularly. At three o'clock in the morning he would go to the door of the nahabat and say to Lakshmi: 'Get up and wake up your aunt. How long will you sleep? It is going to be dawn. Begin your meditation.' In wintertime Sarada Devi wanted Lakshmi to sleep a little longer. When she knew that the Master was outside, she would whisper in Lakshmi's ear: 'Don't answer him. He cannot sleep. It is not yet time to get up. Even the crows and cuckoos are asleep. Don't move from your bed.' Hearing no response from inside, and thinking they were still asleep, the Master would sometimes tease them by pouring water under the door. The ladies had to get up quickly for fear of the bed's getting wet. Sometimes the bed actually got wet. (76)

Another aspect of Holy Mother's life in the nahabat gives us pain. There were no bathing or toilet facilities in the nahabat; and moreover the temple garden was a public place and there was no privacy for women. Holy Mother was extremely bashful and modest. She kept herself veiled so that no one she did not know could see her face. During the dark hours of the morning she would go to the jungle on the bank of the Ganges to answer the call of nature and then would take her bath in the river. Once in the early morning darkness she almost stepped on a crocodile. Later she recalled her sad plight: 'I suffered terribly by suppressing the urge to relieve myself and thus developed physical problems. Only during dark hours of night could I go out.' What discomfort! Later, Yogin Ma (a woman devotee of the Master) realized Sarada's predicament and arranged to build an outhouse near the nahabat.

One should not think that Holy Mother only suffered like a caged bird in the nahabat; she experienced ecstasy and endured all inconveniences by serving her God-intoxicated husband. She reminisced:

What a unique man he was! How many minds he illuminated! What unceasing bliss he radi-

ated! Day and night his room echoed and re-echoed with laughter, stories, talk and music.

The Master sang, and I would listen hour after hour, standing behind the screen of the Nahabat. ... What joyous days we passed through! People poured in day and night, and there was no end of spiritual talk. (76)

### In the Attic of the Shyampukur House

In the middle of 1885 Ramakrishna developed throat cancer. It was difficult for his physicians to go to Dakshineswar regularly, so the devotees took the Master to Calcutta for treatment. The householder devotees provided funds; the young disciples took responsibility for his nursing; and Holy Mother prepared his meals. Several prominent physicians of Calcutta began to treat the Master. Despite his illness, the Master continued to teach.

Swami Saradananda presents a vivid picture of the Shyampukur house where the Master stayed for nearly three months. The Master lived upstairs in a spacious room called the parlour.

To the north and south of the parlour are two verandas, the northern one larger than the southern. To the west of the parlour are two small rooms—one used by devotees who stayed overnight, and the other by Holy Mother for sleeping. The visitors' room has a narrow veranda to the west. A staircase to the roof is at the eastern end of the corridor leading to the Master's room. At the top of those stairs, near the door to the roof, is a covered terrace of about six feet by six feet in size. Holy Mother spent her days on that terrace, and there she cooked the special diet needed by the Master.

It is really amazing how for three months she performed her duties, forgetting all personal inconveniences, while living in that single-family house surrounded by men whom she did not know. As there was only one bathroom for all, she would get up before 3:00 am, finish her bathroom activities, and then silently go to the terrace on the second floor, without anyone knowing. She would spend the whole day there. When the Master's meals were ready, at regular times she would send word downstairs through Swami Advaitananda or Swami

Adbhutananda. At those times the people were asked to leave so she could bring the food and feed the Master, or we [the young disciples] would carry his meals to him if that was more convenient. At noon Holy Mother would eat and rest on the terrace. At 11:00 pm, when everyone else was asleep, she would leave that room and sleep in her bedroom on the first floor until 2:00 am. Fortified by the expectation of the Master's recovery, she spent day after day in that way. She lived there so silently and invisibly that many of the regular visitors did not know that she was living there and carrying the responsibility for the most important service to the Master.<sup>5</sup>

This description needs no further explanation. Holy Mother's daily routine tells us how she practised the Master's teaching, 'Adjust according to time; adjust according to place; adjust according to persons.' This is the only way one can maintain peace and equanimity of mind.

### Back to Kamarpukur Cottage

When Sri Ramakrishna passed away on 16 August 1886, Holy Mother's new life began. To forget the pain of separation from the Master, she left on pilgrimage with a few of the Master's close disciples and devotees. After practising austerities in Varanasi and Vrindaban for a year, she returned to Balaram's house in Calcutta. A little later she, Golap Ma, and Swami Yogananda left for Kamarpukur by train to Burdwan. Upon reaching Burdwan, they walked sixteen miles to Uchalan. Holy Mother was exhausted and hungry, so Golap Ma cooked khichuri for her. After having her meal, she exclaimed, 'Golap, what nectar you have prepared!' When they reached Kamarpukur, Golap Ma and Swami Yogananda stayed with her for a couple of weeks and

then returned to Calcutta.

Holy Mother began her life alone in Kamarpukur. She was then thirty-four years old. While living at Cossipore, the Master advised Holy Mother:

Look, don't extend your hand to anyone for a penny. You will never lack ordinary food and plain clothing. If you ask for money from anyone, your head will be sold to that person. It is better to have food from someone than to live with that person. Some devotees may lovingly offer their homes for you to live in, but never give up your cottage in Kamarpukur. You stay in Kamarpukur. Grow some spinach. Eat that spinach with rice and repeat Hari's name.<sup>6</sup>

But it was not easy to live alone in a village, as a young widow.

First, Holy Mother had to fight poverty and loneliness. She had no money. Later she recalled: 'Trailokya Biswas used to give me seven rupees a month. After the Master's passing away, Dinu [the cashier of the Kali temple] and others conspired and stopped that monthly allowance. My relatives at Dakshineswar considered me as an ordinary mortal and joined with them. Naren fervently requested them, "Please don't stop that allowance to the Mother." But they did.'<sup>7</sup> It took a long time for news of Holy Mother's financial condition to reach the devotees in Calcutta. Swami Saradananda remarked, 'We did not dream that Mother did not have the means to buy even salt.' Moreover, most of the Master's young disciples were then living as wandering monks, so they had no idea of her difficulties.

Second, when the Master passed away at Cossipore, Holy Mother was about to remove her bracelets and put on a white cloth, as was customary for a Hindu widow.

But the Master appeared and forbade her to follow the custom. From then on she wore her bracelets and a sari with a thin red border. Because of this, the narrow-minded and fanatical

***There is no end to the difficulties that Mother Sarada endured. But regardless of what happened, she was an embodiment of forbearance like Mother Earth.***

villagers of Kamarpukur criticized her. In distress, she took off her bracelets. Again the Master appeared and asked her not to discard them. He then told her that Gauri Ma would cite the Vaishnava scriptures to explain why. Gauri Ma told Holy Mother that she could not be a widow, since her husband was none other than the Lord Himself. This vision reassured her. She put on her bracelets again and turned a deaf ear to people's criticism.

Third, Holy Mother was harassed by a mentally ill devotee of the Master. Harish had become insane thanks to his wife's medications to divert him from spiritual life to worldly life. One day he arrived at Kamarpukur and began to act queerly. Holy Mother described the situation:

One day as I entered the compound of our home from a visit with a neighbour, Harish began to chase me. He was then insane. His wife had brought about this condition. There was no one in our house. In a helpless state I began to walk fast around our granary. He pursued me. After going around it seven times I stopped. I assumed my real form [the Divine Mother Bagala], laid him on the ground, placed my knees on his chest, and slapped him hard. He began to gasp for breath. My fingers became red.<sup>8</sup>

Harish became calmer and left for Vrindaban soon after, where he eventually became normal.

Fourth, the Master's close relatives were selfish and indifferent to Holy Mother. Ramalal, Lakshmi and Shivaram spent most of their time in Dakshineswar, so in Kamarpukur she was practically alone and without protection. Yet she wanted to remain in Kamarpukur.

We are struck with grief when we think of Holy Mother's ordeal in Kamarpukur, which lasted an entire year. She did not want anyone to know about her suffering. If the Master's devotees had learned of it, they would have handled the situation immediately. (Later on, of course, they took care of her for the rest of her life.) We guess that there must be a special reason behind this ordeal.

Because we know that the desires of illumined souls always come true, it seems to us that the Master had fulfilled his one unfinished wish through her. Swami Saradananda wrote:

At the threshold of his youth a kind of fancy arose in the Master's mind, prompted by the influence of his inner feminine nature. Because they were born as women, the gopis of Vrindaban attained Satchidananda Krishna through love. This led him to think that if he were born as a woman, he could worship and attain Krishna like the gopis. Thus, viewing the male body as an obstacle to attaining Krishna, he imagined that if he were to be born again he would be a beautiful young widow with long hair, born in a brahmin family, knowing none other than Krishna as husband. There would be provision for plain food and clothes and a small plot of land next to his hut, where he would grow a few kinds of vegetables. There would be an elderly woman with him who served as a guardian, a cow that he would milk himself, and a spinning wheel. His boyish imagination went further. After finishing the household work for the day, he would sing songs about Krishna while spinning the cotton. Then in the evening he would make sweets from the milk of that cow and cry piteously to feed the sweets to Krishna with his own hands. Pleased, Krishna would suddenly appear as a cowherd boy and eat them; thus he would visit daily without anyone knowing.<sup>9</sup>

Holy Mother spent her time in Kamarpukur in much the same manner. Wearing a torn cloth, she grew spinach, cooked rice and vegetables, offered them to Raghuvir, and partook of that prasada. She spent the remainder of her time chanting the Lord's name.

Later Holy Mother explained the reason why she eventually left Kamarpukur:

When after the Master's passing away I moved about here and there for some time and then went to live at Kamarpukur, my relatives seemed to be indifferent towards me. After coming to learn of the high-handedness of the villagers, my mother brought me here (to Jayrambati). ... From that time on I have been living with my brothers through stress and strain. And now, again, they complain, 'She does not look after us.' The human mind is strange in-

deed.<sup>10</sup>

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There is no end to the difficulties that Mother Sarada endured. But regardless of what happened, she was an embodiment of forbearance like Mother Earth. Elderly men whined to her, struck her feet with their heads and told their sad stories; a drunkard shouted from the street and broke her sleep; once a man lay down on the floor and asked her to put her foot on his chest and give him knowledge; another time a disturbed woman twisted her ankle and hurt her so that she would remember her. Sometimes Holy Mother had to intervene between two of her brothers to keep them from fighting; sometimes she needed to seek protection from her crazy sister-in-law who wanted to attack her; moreover, she had endless suffering over her niece Radhu. Once a disciple asked her, 'Mother, how do you bear all these things?' She replied, 'My son, you will understand human suffering when you grow up. You are not a mother.'

Although happiness and misery are inevitable in human life, they cannot perturb those who are established in the Atman. Is there any way to be completely free of misery? Krishna said in the *Bhagavadgita*, 'Feelings of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, are caused by the contact of the senses with their objects. They come and go, never lasting long. You must endure them.'<sup>11</sup> Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Forbear, forbear, forbear. He who forbears, survives; and

he who does not, perishes.' Holy Mother said, 'Suffering is a gift of God. One should have patience like Mother Earth. There is so much turmoil, and so many calamities, going on all over the universe. But Mother Earth forbears everything. Human beings should have that kind of patience and perseverance.'

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## Compassion

Disciple: You initiate devotees because you desire to do so.

Holy Mother: No, I do so out of compassion. They won't leave me. They weep. I feel compassion for them. Besides, what do I gain by it? When I initiate devotees, I have to accept their sins. Then I think, 'Well, this body will die anyway; let them realize the Truth.'

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# The Wisdom of Holy Mother

SWAMI ABHIRAMANANDA

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that when one stands on plain ground, one sees the trees as tall and the bushes as small; but if one climbs to the top of a mountain and looks downward, all the differences in height vanish and there is only greenery everywhere. Similarly, if the mind of a person rises to a higher level, it ceases to recognize social differences and looks upon all human beings as equal. The *Bhagavadgita* identifies this state of equanimity of mind as a mark of spiritually illumined souls. Holy Mother Sarada Devi was a typical example of such equanimity of vision. Saints and sinners were the same to her eyes. Her boundless heart had place even for cats and parrots.

## A Mutual Divine Relationship

To her, everything in the universe was a manifestation of the Mother of the universe. She even looked upon Sri Ramakrishna as the Mother of the universe, and when Sri Ramakrishna gave up his mortal body, she cried, ‘O Mother, where have you gone?’ In turn, Sri Ramakrishna literally worshipped Holy Mother as the Mother of the universe. Thus the divine couple looked upon each other as the Mother of the universe. This type of relationship is unique in the history of the world. When someone asked Holy Mother about the significance of her outliving her husband, she said that it was to demonstrate the ideal of motherhood to the world.

## A Motherhood Transcending All Barriers

The motherliness that Holy Mother demonstrated in her life did not arise from her being a biological mother. It was a love that transcended biological limitations and made her look upon everyone as her own child. Such

motherliness need not necessarily be the property of a woman alone. It could be a man’s as well. A splendid example of this idea is found in the life of Swami Vivekananda. When Swamiji was in a park in London, he noticed a young couple with a baby. The baby was crying inconsolably. No amount of coaxing by the parents could stop the child’s crying. Finally, Swamiji offered to comfort the baby. Curious onlookers in the park looked at him with amusement—how could he, a monk leading an unmarried life, understand the problems of married people with children? Nevertheless, Swamiji took the baby in his arms, put it on his lap and entered into deep meditation. Within a few minutes, the child completely stopped crying and experienced peaceful and deep sleep. Swamiji thus demonstrated a rare motherliness, which even the biological mother of that child was unable to manifest. Holy Mother’s love was similar to the love of Swamiji, breaking all barriers of race and community.

## The Gargi-Maitreyi Ideal

Swami Vivekananda once remarked that Holy Mother combined in her the ideals of Sita, Savitri, Gargi and Maitreyi. It is relatively easy to understand the ideal of Sita and Savitri—the ever-suffering, all-forgiving, eternally sacrificing, obedient daughter and chaste wife. But the ideal of Maitreyi and Gargi is an ancient one and not known to many. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, the great sage Yajnavalkya tells his wife Maitreyi that he wants to renounce the world and bequeath all his wealth to her. Maitreyi asks him, ‘Will that wealth help me attain liberation, attain God?’ Yajnavalkya says, ‘No, not a bit. But it can help you lead a comfortable life.’ Maitreyi replies,

'What is the use of wealth if it cannot take me to God? Let me also renounce the world and follow you to the forests.'

We find a similar incident in the life of Sarada Devi. When a marwari devotee repeatedly requested Sri Ramakrishna to accept money for his personal expenses, Sri Ramakrishna refused it and finally asked him to leave it with Holy Mother. Holy Mother also refused it saying that if she accepted it, she would have to spend it on Sri Ramakrishna anyway.

The other notable Vedic sage Gargi was esteemed not only for her spiritual eminence but also for her powers of judgement. In a debate among the wise ones assembled in the court of Janaka, Gargi boldly declared that Yajnavalkya was the best of the knowers of

extraordinary things; they do ordinary things extraordinarily well.' Sri Sarada Devi's life is a commentary on this statement. She gave importance to even the trivial details of day-to-day work. Even the broomstick got its proper place and respect. Holy Mother thereby showed us that it is the way we perform the small things of life that help us move towards perfection.

Let us see how Holy Mother manifested wisdom even in the small and seemingly insignificant activities of her life.

Holy Mother used to purchase groceries when the prices were at the lowest. She got the house repaired, carpentry works done well before the rainy season. She stacked parcel wrappers properly in one place to be used when needed. She reserved the rice-gruel and vegetable peelings for the cow. She kept the surplus food separately for beggars. Everything was methodically planned and nothing was slipshod, nothing wasted, nothing left to chance.

Once the local panchayat officials of Jayrambati levied an annual tax of five rupees for her newly built house. Holy Mother felt that since charitable and social welfare activities were being carried out from the house, no tax need be paid. She wrote a letter to the president of the panchayat and got the tax waived. Today the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission are exempted from paying most of the taxes applicable to others. What foresight and far-sightedness Mother possessed!

On account of his concern for Holy Mother's health, once a certain brahmacharin began to buy milk for her at double the normal rate. He thought that this way he could buy unadulterated milk. When Holy Mother came to know about this, she objected to it for two reasons. First, if he paid higher rates, the milk vendor would be tempted to increase the price for others also, thereby putting the poor vil-

***There is a saying, 'Great people do not do extraordinary things; they do ordinary things extraordinarily well.' Sri Sarada Devi's life is a commentary on this statement. She gave importance to even the trivial details of day-to-day work.***

Brahman. Like Gargi, Holy Mother also was a keen judge of people and circumstances.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that Sarada Devi was Sarasvati herself. We tend to forget that Sarada Devi was not only the embodiment of motherliness, but also Sarasvati, the personification of Wisdom. When someone asked her whether she obeyed Sri Ramakrishna in all matters, she said, 'In spiritual matters, absolutely; in secular matters, I use my common sense.' After Sri Ramakrishna's passing away, Sarada Devi not only guided his disciples in spiritual matters, but also in the administrative affairs of the Order founded in his name.

### **Extraordinariness in Ordinary Things**

There is a saying, 'Great people do not do

lages to unnecessary strain. Second, it is in the nature of the milk vendor to dilute the milk with water and he would do it even after charging double the normal rate. As if to prove the point, after a few days, one day Holy Mother showed some small fish swimming in the milk. Evidently the vendor had added water from the village pond!

The wife of one Dr Kanjilal wanted Holy Mother's blessings so that her husband's medical practice would thrive. Mother's reply was, 'How can I pray like that, my child? If your husband's medical practice should thrive, then all our villagers should fall ill. I cannot pray for that. I would rather pray for the welfare of all people, which, of course, would include your husband also.'

A dispensary was started for the benefit of the poor people of the area, and some fairly rich people also availed of the facility. When Holy Mother was told about this and a clarification sought as to whether rich people should be given free medicines, Holy Mother thought for a while and replied, 'Knowing fully well that these medicines are meant for the poor, if they still come and wait for free medicine, you will of course serve them if you can. Anyone who comes begging may be considered poor.' Thereby Holy Mother taught the great truth that poverty and affluence were more in the minds of people than in their external circumstances.

When a temple was to be built for Sri Ramakrishna in his birthplace Kamarpukur, the following conversation took place between Holy Mother and Lakshmi Didi, Sri Ramakrishna's niece.

Lakshmi Didi: When the temple comes up, it should be under our control, shouldn't it? The children of Ramlal Dada and Shibu Dada (relatives of Sri Ramakrishna who were priests by profession) will do puja and live there.

Mother: How can that be? The followers of

Sri Ramakrishna are all monks and devotees. They will not observe caste regulations. People from different countries will come here, stay here and have their prasad. But you are householders and you have society. You have to perform marriages and the like for your children. Would it do for you live along with them?

Lakshmi Didi: Then, will Raghuvir and Shitala stay in the temple that is going to be built?

Mother: How is that possible? They are your family deities. On festive days, your daughters and in-laws have to worship them. For Raghuvir, they will construct another temple. There will be left a small passage so that women can come and go.

This brief conversation shows the ex-

***Holy Mother thought for a while and replied, 'Knowing fully well that these medicines are meant for the poor, if they still come and wait for free medicine, you will of course serve them if you can. Anyone who comes begging may be considered poor.'***

traordinary nature of Mother's illumined mind. She establishes the universal character of Sri Ramakrishna and his followers. At the same time, she is keen that the practice of traditional worship of local deities according to local customs and rituals should be preserved and given their rightful place.

### **A Doctor of the Soul**

Holy Mother had a good knowledge of home cures. She did not blindly prescribe the same remedy to everybody but found out the root of the illness and prescribed medicine accordingly. Here is a classic example. When a certain householder disciple complained of severe headache, Mother diagnosed that it was due to heat and prescribed a mixture of camphor and ghee to be applied on his forehead. The headache vanished in a short time.

In an apparently similar case, Swami Virajananda, a great disciple of hers, suffered from violent headache. This continued for several months and gradually resulted in

numbness of the brain and fatigue of body and mind. Stalwarts like Swami Brahmananda and Swami Turiyananda could not find out the cause of his illness. They referred him to famous Ayurvedic physicians of Calcutta, who too could not cure him. When Virajananda went to Jayarambati to see Holy Mother, she was shocked to see his failing health and asked him straightaway, 'My son, where do you concentrate during meditation, in the heart or in the head?' Virajananda replied that he concentrated in the head and found great joy in meditation. Mother exclaimed, 'What have you done, my son! That is the final stage of spiritual practice. In the initial stages, you should concentrate in the heart.' Virajananda became perfectly cured of the illness within a

***'No, my son, you cannot sell Belur Math. It does not belong to you. It belongs to Sri Ramakrishna. You are all strong-minded. You can afford to live under trees. But not all my other sons who will come in future will be able to live under trees. This Math is for their sake.'***

few days of changing his method of meditation.

Mother also believed that faith was the basis of cure. A certain woman disciple of hers was suffering from a severe infection in her hand for twelve years. All medication failed. When Mother came to know about it, she immediately applied Sri Ramakrishna's *charanamrita* (holy water used to wash the deity's feet during worship) and the sores were cured. Mother said that the disease had occurred because she had pared her nails and on the same day cut papayas for cooking. She prescribed for her daily ritual worship of Sri Ramakrishna and whenever the sores occurred, asked her to apply his *charanamrita*. The disciple was completely cured of the infection.

Though an illiterate village woman, Holy Mother had good knowledge of preventive health care and personal hygiene and often advised her disciples on them. She instructed them not to use the nail scissors of barbers and spoke of the dangers involved in eating together from the same plate or in using somebody else's bath towel.

### **She Knew the Value of Education**

Indian society during Holy Mother's time was very conservative. Women were hardly allowed to come out of their houses, not to speak of getting education. But Holy Mother believed that if girls went to school, they would not only improve themselves but would also be of immense help to society. It was at her initiative that Sister Nivedita's girls' school was started. This was one of the first schools to be started in India for women. She used to visit the school and appreciate the intelligence and resourcefulness of the girls. She particularly appreciated two unmarried girls from Madras who were studying at the school and had learnt to do various kinds of jobs.

She discouraged the custom of marrying off the girls at a very young age. She also encouraged women to remain unmarried, or even embrace monastic life if they were disinclined to married life.

She advised the monastic members of the Ramakrishna Order to learn English well so that they could converse with Western admirers of Sri Ramakrishna.

### **Her Far-sightedness**

Though Holy Mother intensely respected and worshipped Sri Ramakrishna, she never allowed his followers to form a cult around him. In this connection, there is an interesting incident. Swami Vivekananda had established the Advaita Ashrama at Mayavati in

the Himalayas, where only the monistic form of spiritual practice was to be followed. Only the subjective side of religion such as monistic meditation and scriptural study were to be practised there. Rituals had no place in such a form of religion. One day, Swamiji noticed that a shrine had been installed in one of the rooms of the Ashrama and regular worship of Sri Ramakrishna was going on. Swamiji vehemently opposed it and in due course the shrine was dismantled. But an over-enthusiastic monk thought that this was unfair to their Master Sri Ramakrishna and so appealed to Holy Mother. She, however, supported Swamiji's viewpoint. She said that Sri Ramakrishna was an Advaitin and so were all his disciples. On hearing this advice of Mother, the monk had to drop the idea of re-establishing the shrine. Here we find Holy Mother's utmost objectivity in taking important decisions, overriding her own personal inclinations and tendencies.

Equally enlightening is another incident which shows the eminently sensible judgement of Holy Mother in the administrative affairs of the Ramakrishna Order. When sufficient funds were not forthcoming for the plague relief works, Swamiji thought of selling the entire property of Belur Math. Swami Shivananda told Swamiji that before he did that he ought to consult Holy Mother. Swamiji agreed and, accompanied by Swamis Brahmananda, Shivananda and Saradananda went to her. After making pranams to Mother, Swamiji told her that he was thinking of selling the Belur Math property in order to serve plague victims. To this, Mother replied, 'No, my son, you cannot sell Belur Math. It does not belong to you. It belongs to Sri Ramakrishna. You are all strong-minded. You can afford to live under trees. But not all my other sons who will come in future will be able to live under trees. This Math is for their sake.' Her decision was taken as final and Swamiji did not sell the

Math. This was one of the several occasions when Holy Mother exercised her power for the welfare of the Ramakrishna Order with her far-sighted vision.

During the time of the Indian freedom struggle, when every Indian was emotionally surcharged with the chant of the swadeshi mantra, Holy Mother advised her disciples to give up the swadeshi mantra and instead chant the Ramakrishna mantra. The swadeshi mantra was useful only until India got independence. On the other hand, the Lord's mantra would have eternal relevance. Such was her far-sightedness!

Whatever her deeds—be it for women's education, freedom from foreign rule, abolition of child marriage, creation of a casteless society or demonstration of the power of God's name—we find that Holy Mother performed them not as a self-conscious leader, calculating to win the approbation of the people around her, but spontaneously, as a mother's duty towards her own children, as a self-imposed, voluntary, spontaneous labour of love.

### **The Ideal for This Age**

Sister Nivedita, who was highly scientific-minded and struggled for six years challenging the great Swami Vivekananda at every step before accepting him as her guru, accepted Mother unconditionally and described her as the ideal of womanhood. Said she, 'To me it has always appeared that she is Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood. But is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of a new?' This statement implies that Holy Mother contained in her personality the entire essence of the cultural heritage of ancient India plus the scientific attitude, practical wisdom and forward vision of the modern woman. Indeed Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi is a complete person and the ideal of this age. \*

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# A Prolegomenon to Devotion

PHILIP ROSOFF-HORNE

In the words of Emerson, 'The foregoing generations beheld God and Nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation *to us* and not a history of theirs.'<sup>1</sup>

Before any task can be undertaken it is important to determine the nature of the task, the methodology and the potential difficulties

involved. Before we can enter into the life of Sarada Devi with the goal of making her an object of our devotion, it is necessary to explore the nature of devotion itself. This essay is an attempt to begin this conversation and is divided into three sections. First, we will explore the major difficulty involved in devotion *as it is commonly practised*. Second, we will discuss some caveats on the practice of the devotional attitude. And finally, we will try to arrive at a clear exposition of true devotion.

## The Primary Error of Devotionalism

We run a grave risk when we make a human being into a God. When we strip a saint of his humanity, we deny our own potential divinity. By putting a deity on an altar we create a separation between that figure and ourselves. The nature of the mind is to distinguish constantly between what is considered *same* and what is seen as *other*; the form that this duality takes will vary from person to person, culture to culture. For some, extended family is *same*, and non-family is *other*. For most of us, these categories are fluid and shift with the time, place and circumstances of day-to-day life. Perhaps at work our comrades are *same*, and when we go home at the day's end, our workmates become *other* while family becomes *same*. When we put a deity on an altar, we make it an *other*, an unnatural, supernatural thing, something different from ourselves, a stranger. But, God is our innermost essence, our most authentic Self. Thus, by making a human being into a God, we run a grave risk of making Him into an *other* and short-circuiting true devotion.

Once we put that human-made-God on

the altar, we demand of it awe-inspiring miracles and superhuman feats of grace. We bombard it with our minor and major desires and expect fulfilment. When our prayers are not answered, it must be due to our own shortcomings; the flaw cannot be with the God-figure, because that would call into question the entire closed system of worshipper-worshipped, and such doubt is terrifying to the believer. If, on the other hand, the prayer is answered, we impute it to divine grace and ignore the efficacy of self-effort and common sense. This is the inescapable dynamic of worshipping a deity on an altar. The perversity of this dynamic is the result of making God an *other*.

### The One Free from *Same/Other*

Of all of the saintly-wise men and women, Sarada Devi least deserves being made into an *other*. Some saints are more likely vehicles for this kind of devotionalism. Ramakrishna astounded his visitors by the ease with which he could experience exalted states of awareness not often accessible to the rest of us;

and that lion of the intellect, Swami Vivekananda, had a roar so powerful that he silenced anyone who entered his domain. But Sarada Devi? Who was she? A humble, poor, almost illiterate village woman whose life was devoted to cutting vegetables and rolling out chapatis, to worrying about her crazy relatives and the slander of village gossips. She hid under the bed when the dentist came<sup>2</sup> (given the level of hygiene of a village dentist early in this century, this was probably the wisest course) and had a deathly fear of ghosts. She was human, all too human; and what made her a truly great human, a saint, was that she had overcome the dichotomy of *same/other*: the world was entirely her own.

When we read through the stories told about Sarada by the men and women who knew her, we find a particular scenario repeated many times. Someone comes and spends a few days with her and when it is time to leave, Sarada follows them down the road weeping; her love was so profound that the pain of separation tore at her heart. Here was a woman who let out only one sob when her husband died; yet when a guest left her home, the suffering was more than she could bear. She lived the mantra '*Atithi devo bhava*, treat the guest as a god.'<sup>3</sup> She lived the spirit of the *mahavakyas*: she saw no difference between her self and the other. She lived love.

### Love and Devotion

There is a great difference between this kind of love and devotion. 'I love God' is a vastly different statement from 'I am devoted to God.' We see that difference in the grammar itself. The first phrase reveals a direct relationship in which I and God are related by a verb in the active mood, 'love'. Love is not a quality but a state of awareness (*chit*, or essence). We can even drop the direct object 'God'; 'I love' suffices.

But in the second statement, 'am devoted' is passive. 'I am' is the essence, and 'devoted' is adjectival, a secondary quality. Then

rather than a *direct* object ('God') as in the first phrase, the second uses an *indirect* object. When we are devoted 'to God', God is made an object that is separated from us even further by the particle 'to', a particle that points out and delineates separation. Rather than an immediate (un-mediated) experience of God as in the phrase 'I love God', in the phrase 'I am devoted to God' we have a mediated experience. There is separation. And, anywhere we see that kind of separation, we are facing away from the truly authentic in spiritual life, which is that unsullied oneness of love in which Sarada lived with natural ease and grace, every moment of every day.

### Devotion from Generation to Generation

When we look at religious movements from a historical perspective, we cannot help but see that devotion, as it is commonly understood, is one of the causes of their decline. A great man comes and inspires those around him to live authentic lives. The followers—in order to deepen their own individual spiritual lives—contrive practices or methods by which to keep fresh the saint's memory after his passing. They write books, tell stories, teach or, in a simple way, imbue some talisman or artefact with their cherished memories. To this talisman (like the photographs of Ramakrishna, Sarada and Swamiji) either actually or metaphorically they offer flowers. Since what we see we become, the follower will by any means necessary work to keep his mind on the spirit in which the saint lived in order to *live his own life* in the same authentic way. Their devotion is to a man or woman whose manner of speaking, sitting, moving<sup>4</sup> they *knew* intimately. Of the three modes of knowledge categorized in the Vedanta, the most authentic form is this kind of personal experience.

Then comes the next generation. These disciple's disciples have not had the good fortune to live in the actual presence of the saint; but his influence permeates the lives of his immediate followers, and this is inspiration

enough. By experiencing the force of character of those first disciples, this second generation can deduce the greatness of the saint. According to Vedanta, the second highest mode of knowledge is deduction from experience. To the talisman this second generation adds their flowers of devotion atop the pile of flowers left by the first disciples; but this secondary devotion is not direct—it is mediated by inference.

Then come the following generations. Their devotion is not based upon real experience, but upon faith, faith in the testimony of others who are believed to be authorities because they heard and had faith in the testimony of others.

Thus, over time a dynamic occurs in which each generation must retell the stories of the previous generation with a predictable degeneration in reliability.

This is similar to a game called telephone we used to play as children. Twenty or so children will sit in a circle. The first will whisper some phrase into the ear of the second, who will whisper the same phrase in the ear of the third and so on around the circle. Inevitably, when the phrase reaches the person where it originated, it has changed beyond recognition.

So too, this chain of testimony in religion. This faith in the testimony of others, according to Vedanta, is the lowest form of knowledge. (And we should remember that Swami Vivekananda says in many places that *true* knowledge comes only from experience.)

By this third generation, the talisman—itsself never more than a shadow or symbol of the lived life of a saint—becomes lost, buried below a mountain of flowers of devotion. All that remains is a history of flowers. So these third and further generations offer their devotion to the residue of the devotion of others.

Human beings are pack animals. We all want to be part of a winning team. An altar so overwhelmed must be a worthwhile repository for devotion. It is a solid investment.

This kind of mediated devotion is one of

the greatest obstacles to a sincere and authentic spiritual life in two ways. First, since the later generations of devotees have had no intimate knowledge of the saint, they must imagine the life of the person; this imagination is no more than a fantasy creation of their own limited egos. Therefore, when they do their devotions to the talisman of the saint, what they are really doing is worshipping the image of their own small selves and thus strengthening that same small self that keeps them from God.

The second obstacle follows directly from this. Since the saint figure has become no more than a shadow of the devotee's own psyche (bearing little or no relation to the actual man or woman who once lived), and since self-protection is our most basic human drive, the devotee must strenuously protect his attitude toward the talisman, that is his own ego structure.

Were it not for the pertinacious attachment to our own narrow psychological selves, each of us would be 'realized', or living in the 'real' rather than the psychological. We are not realized because we are too terrified to relinquish our petty prejudices and opinions. So, since each person has a self-limited, narrow view of the life of his worshipped saint, that view *must* come into conflict with the opinions of others. What is at stake in this conflict is not the truth of the life of the saint, but the validity of the individual's fantasy life of the saint. The more narrow the devotee's ideal, the more threatened he will feel at the inevitable conflict. As he feels more threatened, he becomes more fanatic. The more fanatic the devotion, the more emotional. The individual must supersede the devotional excesses of others in order to reaffirm the special validity of his own ego structure.

And, since overstatement undermines while understatement exalts, the end result of this hyperbolic spiral of devotionism is the cause of the disintegration of the religion through the denigration of the simple life of the saint.

## Caveats on Devotional Practice

Thus we are left with a seemingly insuperable difficulty. What kind of relationship can we twenty-first century, post-modern, scientific men and women have with a saint figure whose life has been mediated by mythology? An event happens; a man tells the story of the event. His story is necessarily a myth. When disciples tell the lives of saints, they are creating new mythology. As Swamiji says, 'The moment a great man rises, they build a beautiful [mythology] around him. Science and truth is all the religion that exists. Truth is more beautiful than any mythology in the world.'<sup>5</sup>

No one intentionally misconstrues actual events; but as we explored above, devotees tend to see only what they want to see reflected in the object of their devotion. Thus there are three caveats to keep in mind if we would have an *authentic* relationship with a dead saint.

### First Caveat: Accept Limitations of Personal Views

First, one must admit that one's own presuppositions concerning the life, beliefs and attitudes of the saint are necessarily flawed. No one can say that he *knows* another human being who sits in vivo before him; how then could anyone maintain that he *knows* an exceptional historical person whose life is only seen through layer after layer of smaller minds? One direct disciple gave this same caution:

One day at the Udbodhan a certain Brahmacharin told the revered Sarat Maharaj in support of his case: 'The Mother said this.' The Swami immediately became grave and said, 'Look here, even I am not able to understand many a time if the Mother really said something, or whether what I heard was only an echo of my own thought.'<sup>6</sup>

As Socrates said, the only reason that the Oracle at Delphi pronounced him the wisest

man on earth was that he alone, of all men, knew that he knew nothing.

### Second Caveat: Study the Life from Different First-hand Accounts

Second, and paradoxically, one must study and study the life of the saint from the first-hand experiences recorded during or shortly after his life. There are three reasons for this: First, like the Zoroastrian practice of never allowing the sacred fire to fail, this study keeps the original inspiration of the saint alive in our minds. Second, as we repeatedly read the stories, our image of the life of the human being, *as he or she truly was*, will become fuller and deeper. Each of the recorders of reminiscences is like one of the blind men holding to a part of the elephant. But we are also blind men, in another part of the world, trying to picture an elephant by hearing *their* blind and partial descriptions read over the Internet. The more carefully we listen, the more detailed our picture will become— though we know we will never actually *see* the elephant. We must fight through the murk of the devotional prejudices of each of the chroniclers to arrive at a better sense of the saint beneath. It is like a Zeno's paradox of study. With each re-reading, we come closer to the real person by half, then closer by half of the remainder and then again by half of that remainder ad infinitum though we can never arrive. What is important is not the goal, but the process. As the great philosopher Benedict de Spinoza said, 'The more we understand individual objects, the more we understand God.'<sup>7</sup> So, the deeper our acquaintance with the life of a saint, the more we can appreciate how God is *man*-ifested in him. And the third reason for studying the life of the saint is that we can use this continual remembrance as a touchstone by which to measure the purity or dross of our own daily lives. The old African-American hymn says, 'Keep your eyes on the prize, hold

on, hold on.' These reminiscences help us on a daily basis to avoid a gradual veering off from what is most important in spiritual life; it helps us to keep our eyes on the prize, to hold on, hold on.

### **Third Caveat: Stress the *How* than *What***

And the third caveat to having a sincere relationship with the memory of a saint, is that we must focus on the *how* and not the *what* of their lives. Too often, in the narrowness of their views, devotees grab hold of what the saint did and miss the spirit in which he did it. In Rishikesh a sadhu who died recently and was deeply respected for the purity and goodness of his life loved to feed cows. Now his followers have made it their duty to feed and care for the cows of Rishikesh. Were these cows the sine qua non of this saint's life? Of course not. The cows were the outward manifestation of the love that he had developed for all beings. If you would raise the water level in the river, you don't dredge the delta, but open

the dam gates; so, this saint went to the source of his being. Then seeing there sweetness, he loved and cared for the cows. We see regularly examples of misapplied attention to detail in the lives of devotees. The awful result of this is that, as the generations pass, this attention to the *what* rather than the *how* is dogmatized, becomes a requirement for the spiritual life of the cult without which salvation, or liberation, is impossible. Thus, Shankara repeatedly emphasized that ritualistic karmas were useless for spiritual life. In order to have an authentic relationship with the saint, we must attend to the spirit in which he performed his daily mundane tasks, to how he lived his life, since God is best seen in the mundane, not the miraculous. What the saints did varied with the unique time, place and circumstances in which they found themselves; what was consistent was the spirit, the authenticity which infused all of their actions. It is this we should emulate.

## **The Nature of True Devotion**

**H**ow can a child or a young man or woman, best serve their mother? The true devotee will determine the deepest desire of the object of devotion and then do the best possible job of fulfilling that desire. What is it that any mother wants from her child? Does she want her child to stay always near her, year after year, long into adulthood, hands folded in humble submission, inundating her with syrupy words of adulation? Does she want to suffer endless showers of mantras and perfumed flowers? A mother's greatest desire is that her children should, with purity of character, strength of resolve and unshakeable integrity, achieve success in whatever they do. This kind of child gives his mother the profound satisfaction that no sentimental show of devotion could ever equal.

### **What Does Mother Want from Us?**

Mother Sarada is no different. She once said that the devotees can be put into three

classes. The lowest class want her to solve all of their problems. The mediocre class want to be with her all the time because they love her so much. The great devotees offer pranams and then go about their business. She wanted from her children the greatest of all goods: realization of their own divinity. That is the business they were to go about. She did not care one whit about being worshipped by others.

Swami Ishanananda referred to Kedar Maharaj's observation that seeing the commonplace actions of the guru, the disciple's faith and devotion may be reduced [that is one should constantly maintain the attitude that the guru is God Himself and not human]. Holy Mother told him, laughing, '... don't go spoiling your minds with these words. If it is true, how can I get on with my work? Do not entertain such a godly attitude, but have a human attitude towards me ... and carry on with your work'<sup>8</sup>

What Sarada, and every real spiritual personality, wants from their students is that they should equal or surpass them. She finds the greatest pleasure in their greatest success. She does not want your sentimental devotional wailings; she wants your life. Give her your mundane life. That is true devotion.

Let us return to the tableau of the departing bullock cart and Sarada shedding tears on the road. This is an excellent metaphor for the difference between the authentic and inauthentic in spiritual life. Where do you see yourself in this picture? Are you the departing guest in the cart overwhelmed with the feeling that you are loved? Or are you the woman in the road whose love is so deep that her heart is split open with the pain of separation from the beloved? The merely religious will be in the cart, passive, at the whim of the bullock of circumstances, content with the knowledge that they are loved. The spiritual person will identify with Sarada Devi. They would rather love than be loved, would rather devote than be devoted, would rather realize than be realized. How much better to *live* authentically, to have that effervescent experience as part and parcel of every moment, instead of feeding on an evanescent memory! To quote Swamiji once again:

These old people were all messengers of God. ... But they are dead, dead as doornails! And we are alive. We must go ahead! Religion is not following Jesus or Mohammed. Even if an imitation is good, it is never genuine. Be not an imitation of Jesus, but be Jesus! You are quite as great as Jesus, Buddha, or anybody else. If we are not, we must struggle and be. ... The greatest religion is to be true to your own nature. Have faith in yourselves!

Shortly before his death, Buddha said, 'I

am pointing at the moon and all you can do is worship my finger.' What a beautiful analogy this is! In a simple parable this great saintly man gave us the nature of true devotion. Ignore his finger, look at the moon: *forget the personality and live the principle*. Fill your eyes and so embody the full moon of realization. That is what the mother wants from the child; that is what the guru wants from the disciple; that is what Sarada wants from us; that is the only valid manifestation of devotion to her memory. One repetition of the mantra, one step forward towards Self-knowledge is equal to thousands of protestations of love and devotion and lakhs of offered flowers. The only true *pushpanjali* is a life lived authentically. \*

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If you love a human being, you will have to suffer for it. He is blessed, indeed, who can love God alone. There is no suffering in loving God. Be devoted to God and take shelter at His feet. It is enough to remember that there is someone—call Him Father or Mother—who is always protecting you.

—Holy Mother

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# Purity Incarnate

SWAMI BRAHMESHANANDA

It is rainy season. Puddles of rainwater have formed on the road and the children are beside themselves with joy. Ah, how cool it is, and what fun to play in the puddles! One boy has made a paper boat and is setting it off on the mini lake, while the other is making a drain to remove the accumulated water. Suddenly one of the children slips and falls down. He is hurt, of course, and his clothes have become dirty. The rest of the children laugh aloud and make fun of him. Poor boy, he can't even weep! Mortified at having become a laughing stock, he is trying hard to fight back his tears. Hearing the noise outside, the boy's mother comes out of the house. Seeing her, the boy can no longer suppress his cry, and he bursts out. The mother quickly picks up her child and takes him into the house. She pats and consoles him, washes him thoroughly and dresses him in fresh, clean clothes.

This is a regular affair in every family. There is nothing special about a mother cleaning her child when he dirties himself. Nor is the task difficult for her. After all, who will wash the child if not his mother? In the same strain, Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi used to say, 'If my child gets smeared with dirt, I will have to wash and clean him. Who else will do it?' But this statement of hers was not made in the context of bodily cleaning. Holy Mother used to perform the arduous task of washing away the moral blemishes tarnishing the character of people with the ease and spontaneity of a mother. To transform others' character, destroy their sins or vicariously bear the suffering caused by others' sins in one's own body in the form of pain or disease, can be done only by a rare few highly evolved spiritual giants. Jesus was one, and so were Sri

Ramakrishna and Holy Mother. She once said, 'All can become the mother of the virtuous. How many would like to be the mother of the wicked? If I don't bear the sins of others, who else will?' About the purpose of the divine advent of Sri Ramakrishna and herself, she once said: 'Why, my dear, did the Master come only to enjoy *rasagollas*?'<sup>1</sup>

## Who Can Sanctify Others?

To be able to absolve others of sins and passions, one must have, to begin with, purity of the highest degree. We cannot expect to wash a dirty cloth with dirty water; similarly, an impure person cannot purify someone else. Instead, he will get all the more impure if he comes in contact with a person of bad character. Novices and spiritual aspirants are therefore advised to remain away from people of dubious character. Mental purity and impurity, and spirituality are infectious and communicable. Persons with pure character can transmit it to the degree of their own purity. Holy Mother was undoubtedly the very embodiment of purity. Rightly has the poet-saint Swami Abhedananda said, 'To Her whose life story is sanctifying and character pure,/ To Her whose life breathes sanctity,/ To Her who is verily the embodiment of purity,/ To Her my repeated salutations.'

In the course of a conversation, Mother once said to a disciple that she had never consciously committed any sin in her life, and the physical ailments like rheumatism which she suffered were not due to her own sins but due to accepting the sins of others. Besides, she asserted, she was blessed by the divine touch of Sri Ramakrishna at the tender age of five. Where then was the possibility of committing

a sin? (400-1)

### Sri Ramakrishna on Her Purity

Sri Ramakrishna too has attested to the perfectly blemishless character of Sarada Devi. He was so deeply impressed by her immaculate purity that in later days he gave expression to it in these words:

If she had not been as pure as she really was, if she had lost self-control and seduced me, then who can say if I too might not have lost self-control and come down to the physical plane? After my marriage I prayed earnestly to the Divine Mother (of the Universe), 'Mother, do please totally eradicate all passion from my wife.' Living with her at that time, I realized that the Mother (of the Universe) had really responded to my importunity. (47)

Sri Ramakrishna considered Holy Mother as pure as the Ganga, which cannot be tainted by the touch of the dirtiest object. Holy Mother used to remain always engaged in daily chores like an ordinary worldly woman, which gave onlookers the impression that she was deeply entangled in the world. Such a thought once arose even in the mind of Yogin Ma, one of her close companions. One day while bathing in the Ganga, she saw Sri Ramakrishna in a vision, pointing to a dead body of an infant floating on the river. Thakur said to her that just as the Ganga did not become impure by the touch of the corpse, Holy Mother could not become impure through worldly involvements.

### Purer than the Ganga

The fact is, Sarada Devi was purer than even the Ganga! Once a lady of her household on returning home from the town complained that she had become impure by touching something impure on the road. She therefore wanted to have a bath. It was winter and Holy Mother advised her not to

bathe, lest she should catch cold; she could instead just wash her hands and feet. But the lady was not satisfied with this simple prescription. So Holy Mother asked her to sprinkle a little Ganga water on her person and take a sip of that all-purifying holy water. When even this failed to satisfy the lady, Mother made a startling suggestion: 'Then touch me!' It was not an egotistic statement made by an immature saint; it was a plain declaration of her own perfect purity, and her power of sanctifying others, by the Divine Mother Herself, who was absolutely sure of her divine, purifying stature!

### No Fault-finding

Inability to see faults in others is yet another sign of Holy Mother's great purity. What we are within, we see without. A child does not differentiate between a sinner and a saint. To him all are good. Because its heart is pure, it does not see thieves and cheats outside. Holy Mother, too, was absolutely pure like a child. In the course of a conversation she once said: 'Formerly, I also took notice of a lot of other people's drawbacks. Then, by praying for long to the Master with tearful eyes "Master, I can no more bear finding faults" I could at last get rid of the habit of picking holes in other peoples' clothes. When I was at Vrindaban, I used to visit Bankubihari (Krishna in a bent pose) and pray to him, "Your form is bent, but Your mind is straight—kindly straighten the windings of my mind."' (369)

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The result was that Holy Mother could not see others' faults even when pointed out. Once Golap Ma, another of her close companions, was scolding a maidservant. Holy Mother casually asked what the matter was. In reply, Golap Ma almost accusingly remarked there was no use telling Mother of the mistake made by the maidservant, since she would not be able to appreciate the fault. Then Holy Mother said, 'All find faults; if I don't, the world will not be destroyed.'

Although Holy Mother was pure by birth, she had performed severe austerities to acquire absolute purity. At Dakshineswar, while meditating at night, she would look at the full moon and pray earnestly with folded hands, 'Make my heart as white as your rays!' (110) The fact is that Holy Mother's mind soared far above the concepts of sin and virtue.

### Compassion for Others

One may be pure, but may not be inclined to help others. Hence the next condition for purifying others is to feel compassion for sinners and the suffering. It goes without saying that Holy Mother was the very embodiment of compassion, love and mercy. She spent her whole life for the good of others. And this help was more spiritual than material. Holy Mother would melt with pity if anyone addressed her as 'Mother' and would unhesitatingly accept that person as her own, even if he were the worst of blackguards. After Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi, Holy Mother

initially did not find any purpose or reason for her existence. However, she soon realized that she had to live in order to fulfil the purpose for which Sri Ramakrishna had incarnated, that is for the good of the world, for the emancipation of the virtuous. There are many instances of Holy Mother's compassion, so we need not go into details.

### She Could Uplift the Most Degraded

But one may be pure and compassionate and yet unable to help others get rid of their sins if one is not endowed with special spiritual power. Holy Mother had much greater spiritual power and capacity to digest others' sins than Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples. She could initiate and purify people with intense demoniacal tendencies, whom even spiritual giants like Swami Brahmananda and Swami Premananda could not help.

Once, three devotees came to Jayrambati with a letter of introduction from Swami Brahmananda. At first Holy Mother refused to initiate them and asked them to go back to Belur Math. The devotees, however, again approached her the next day and importuned her more piteously for initiation. After their repeated importunities Mother finally initiated them. Listening to the detailed account of the whole incident later at Belur Math, Swami Brahmananda and Swami Premananda were stunned to silence. Then Swami Premananda heaved a long sigh and said with folded hands, 'Mercy, mercy! It is by this glorious compassion that the Mother is protecting us for ever. We can't express in words the poison that she has accepted. If we had done so, we would have been burnt down to ashes.' (402)

### How Mother Purified Others

Holy Mother accomplished this stupendous task of purifying her disciples in various ways. One was by giving them

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spiritual initiation. It is said that during initiation the sins of the disciple are transmitted to the guru. Holy Mother used to say, 'I impart the mantra out of pity. They become importunate, they weep, their sight fills me with mercy. Out of compassion I grant initiation. Else what do I gain? One has to take over sins by giving initiation.' (400) Due to unholy company an average individual's mind becomes impure, but the minds of highly evolved souls like Holy Mother remain untarnished. However, their body suffers. Mother said, 'If we don't take over sins and sufferings and digest them, who else will?' And again, 'A pure person's touch brings joy.'

Second, Mother purified others by loving assurance and making them confess and surrender their good and bad deeds to God. This was important for those disciples who had a severe sense of guilt and who used to be tormented, as it were, by the psychological burden of their sins. Mother would ask such disciples to specifically utter, 'I surrender all the sins committed by me till today.' By such a declaration, their sense of guilt would be removed and they would plunge into spiritual practices with greater and unhindered zeal. Such confession and repentance is a standard psychological technique accepted in all religions as a sure way of getting rid of the burden of past sins. This act of confession and getting initiated into spiritual life after giving up the past life with all its actions, is called in theology 'conversion' and is considered equivalent to rebirth. God gives, as it were, a chance to the individual to start a new life after relinquishing his past evil deeds done consciously or unconsciously, knowingly or unknowingly. This psychological process is sometimes termed 'justification'. But this alone is not enough to turn the person into a saint. To become really sanctified, one must follow the path

shown by the guru, perform spiritual practices in accordance with his instructions and never repeat evil deeds. This is 'sanctification'. Holy Mother utilized both these methods to purify others. First, she would instil confidence and faith in them by making them realize their spiritual relationship with her; this would eliminate their guilty feelings and raise them to a higher level of consciousness. Second, she would goad them to do spiritual practices. She would say, 'I have done what I had to do at the time of initiation; but if you want to enjoy the fruit thereof, do spiritual practice.'

A woman belonging to a respectable family had gone astray due to some bad impulse. She felt repentant and by good luck came to Holy Mother. She stood at the doorway trembling with guilt and said, 'Mother, what will be my lot? I am not fit to draw nearer to you in this holy chapel.' Mother stepped forward and throwing her holy arms round the woman, said, 'Come, my daughter, come in. You have realized what sin is, and you are repentant. Come, I shall initiate you. Lay everything at the Master's feet, and cast away all fear.' (399)

Third, Holy Mother would herself perform spiritual practices on behalf of her disciples, especially those who were spiritually weak, or had to face social or personal difficulties in life, and who were unable to do regular japa and meditation.

Finally, her superhuman love trans-

***'M' was delighted and said with fervour, 'If Mother has looked at you, you need not worry anymore!' Then 'M' sang a line from a famous Bengali song: 'One would float in the ocean of bliss if the Divine Mother simply turned and looked at him.' ... Holy Mother had already turned her benign glance at the devotee. He therefore need have no worry.***

formed the character of the worst sinners. Amjad, a notable figure in the drama of Holy Mother's life, was a known robber. But he used to behave like a docile child in her presence. He would even prove a most resourceful person when anything special was required by her.

There was such a tremendous soothing and purifying power in Holy Mother's personality that whoever came under its spell would feel elevated. Devotees were convinced that if they saluted her in the morning, or even just saw her once, their whole day would pass joyfully. There was a certain devotee who felt that his whole year would pass peacefully if he but once visited Holy Mother at Jayrambati!

Once a householder devotee of Holy Mother came to her and unhesitatingly disclosed to her all his evil passions by which he was being badly assailed. Mother silently listened to him but did not say a word of advice or consolation. She simply kept gazing at him. The poor devotee remained seated near her feet for some time and getting no response from her, quietly got up and left, depressed and despondent. He felt all the more guilty for having related such things to Holy Mother, which, he thought, ought not to have been told to her. Seeking comfort and consolation, he went to 'M', the compiler of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Finding him sad, 'M' asked him the reason and the devotee described the whole event. 'M' was delighted and said with fervour, 'If Mother has looked at you, you need not worry anymore!' Then 'M' sang a line from a famous Bengali song: 'One would float in the ocean of bliss if the Divine Mother

simply turned and looked at him.' Holy Mother had already turned her benign glance at the devotee. He therefore need have no worry.

## Conclusion

But Holy Mother's mission of destroying sin is not yet over. She is continuing to do it through her presence in her pictures. She herself used to say that the picture (*chāyā*) and the person (*kāyā*) are non-different. The picture of saints do not merely represent them, their very presence can be felt in them. If we accept this principle, we can say that Mother is actually present in her pictures even today and that through them she is shedding her gracious, benevolent, all-purifying glance on all who come within its ambit. Let us adorn our rooms with her pictures and pray to her to continue to shower her grace on us, her feeble children, who are unable to get rid of our evil propensities all by ourselves.

Holy Mother has promised to grant whatever one asked of her, addressing her as 'Mother'. There is nothing that she cannot give. Let us, therefore, with full conviction believe that she is our real Mother, and call on her, 'O Ma, grant us purity. Make our character as pure as yours.' Rightly has Swami Abhedananda said: 'Binding our minds to Thee with the bonds of Thy love,/ Thou dost transmute our very vices into virtues.' \*

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A woman's only ornament is modesty. A flower is indeed blessed when it is offered at the feet of the deity; otherwise it would be better for it to wither away on the plant. It pains me very much to see a dandy make a bouquet of flowers and gently put it to his nose, saying, 'Ah, how sweet it smells!' Perhaps the next moment he drops it on the floor and may step on it, without even looking at it.

—Holy Mother

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# The Paramahansa's Child

DR PREMA NANDAKUMAR

In 1957 my father placed in my hands a little book published by the Advaita Ashrama in Mayavati saying this was first published sixty years earlier. It had an unprepossessing appearance. But the moment I began reading it, Sister Nivedita's eloquence drew me into a whirlpool of astonishment. *Kali the Mother* has seven brief essays and this particular edition had Swami Vivekananda's poem 'Kali the Mother' as the concluding message:

Who dares misery love,  
And hug the form of Death,  
Dance in Destruction's dance,  
To him the Mother comes.<sup>1</sup>

Sister Nivedita's essays seemed to reflect this terribilita of the Divine. I was particularly drawn to the essay on 'Two Saints of Kali': Ramprasad and Ramakrishna. I read them often and recreated in my mind the scene far away and long ago when the disciples of Sri Ramakrishna gathered round him as he lay withdrawing from the physical, and how he left them 'while one whose music he had loved chanted over him the name of God'. Then came a sentence which made me feel hushed and curious at the same time: 'Later in the dark, came a woman, sitting at his feet crying softly, and calling him "Mother"'. It was that disciple who had been his wife.'

The sentence has been a guardian all these decades as I have myself gone through the several stages from a teenager to an ageing person. Through all these years, the sentence has been that lamp of knowledge lit by one of the Alvars with love as the bowl, aspiration as the ghee and a constant meditation as the glowing wick. Sister Nivedita has placed in this vision all that we need to know about the secular and the sacred, the human and the divine, life and immortality.

## Mother's 'Mother'

The curiosity regarding a wife calling her husband a 'mother' has been largely satisfied by *Sri Ramakrishna the Great Master* and the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*. Swami Nirvedananda quotes Holy Mother assuring Hriday that the Master was her 'father, mother, friend, relative, my all-in-all in life'. Only the realized soul can see through the Vishnumaya of externalities and find the Divine Mother within. Beyond the comforts of everyday life and the satisfactions of the outer manifestations of Prakriti, lies the zone of maternal love. Sarada Devi was not disheartened by having to live in the nahabat or the denials and inconveniences in her everyday life. She simply stepped into the zone of love spread by the Master for his children and became a child there. Naturally, the child cried out for the mother, when Sri Ramakrishna chose to withdraw from the earthly life.

## Purity and Bliss

'It was that disciple who had been his wife.' Unerring is Sister Nivedita's description, for Lakshmi is the chief disciple of Narayana and such was Sarada Devi to Sri Ramakrishna. She tuned her life with him to be a disciple, she became a homa bird who found safety in his maternal shade. How each of her actions since she became Sri Ramakrishna's wife has been etched in our minds for our good! There is a flow of purity when with incandescent innocence she told the women devotees of Sri Ramakrishna about her meeting him for the first time when she was fourteen years old: 'My heart was incessantly full of an indescribable bliss, and I felt always since then as if a jar of bliss, full to overflowing, was installed in my heart.' This is the

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Savitri come to life again, serving the  
mother-in-law, serving her husband, and  
all the time a taponvita.***

*bhāva* of Radha! Throughout her life, when meditating upon the Master, this ananda-consciousness apparently remained with her. It may be mentioned here that after the Master's withdrawal, when Holy Mother went to Vrindaban, she would often go away on her own to the banks of Yamuna and remain in a state of bliss. Her companions had to go in search of her and bring her back to their place of residence.

**A Unique Spiritual Couple**

And what an acharya Sri Ramakrishna was to this eternal Radha! He was always full of solicitude. Holy Mother learnt from the Master how to keep things in their proper place in the tiny nahabat room, how to prepare the wick for the lamp, how to fold the betel leaf and the method of cutting up vegetables. He even taught her how to travel and get the luggage safely across! She also received from him the meditational movement which leads the mind into a state of samadhi, of absolute peace.

There is no doubt that this was the ancient Savitri come to life again, serving the mother-in-law, serving her husband, and all the time a *taponvita*. Thirteen years of tapasya in Dakshineswar as an extraordinary disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, as his child, cooking his food, watching from a distance, standing hidden in the nahabat as Sri Ramakrishna danced in ecstasy. It was not difficult for Holy Mother to put up with physical discomforts, for she was used to a life of self-denial. But for a young wife, even the wanderings in higher planes of consciousness by a husband could be unnerving and certainly shattering at times. It is our good fortune that Holy Mother was verily an image of Indian spirituality and

she could understand the significances clearly when the Master addressed her while she was massaging his feet: 'The Mother who is in the temple, the Mother who has given birth to this body and is now living in the nahabat—the same Mother is now massaging my feet. Truly, I always look upon you as a form of the blissful Divine Mother.'

However, the real test came when the Master decided to worship Sarada Devi as the Divine Mother in the ritualistic manner. Imagine the scenario: She has come to his room to offer prayers while he is to conduct the worship of Phalaharini Kalika Devi and sits watching him as he goes through the preliminaries. Suddenly he asks her to sit on the wooden seat decorated with auspicious drawings meant to invoke the presence of the Devi. Swami Saradananda's description of the event takes us to the regions of the Greater Mind where the Master saw the truth of the manifestation in Holy Mother. In the words of Sri Aurobindo:

For He who Is grows manifest in the years  
And the slow Godhead shut within the cell  
Climbs from the plasm to immortality.  
But hidden, but denied to mortal grasp,  
Mystic, ineffable is the spirit's truth,  
Unspoken, caught only by the spirit's eye.  
When naked of ego and mind  
it hears the Voice;  
It looks through light to ever greater light  
And sees Eternity ensphering Life.<sup>2</sup>

That day when Sri Ramakrishna saw 'Eternity ensphering Life' in Sarada Devi may be said to have begun the matrix of a new time. As though he felt that Mother's power was needed to help the disciples create the Mission, the Master 'gave away for ever at the lotus feet of the Devi his all—the results of his sadhana, his rosary and so on—along with his self and saluted her, uttering the mantras.' As for himself, 'the god-man attained perfection in all respects.'

Holy Mother seems to have gone through the earlier part of the ritual worship in a semi-conscious state and later reached samadhi. However, what is striking about Mother's life as an inspiration to millions of women is that this 'beatification' in no way changed her approach to human beings.

She was the same Sarada Devi whose patience was phenomenal, who was capable of doing physical work of all kinds without any thought given to 'status' and who was verily compassion personified. Again, this compassion of hers was not demonstrative. It came to her as unobtrusively as the tender leaves to a tree. She showed us how to achieve soulful culture while engaged in the harrying duties of a householder's life.

#### **At Home with Overseas Visitors**

The first time Sister Nivedita met her in the Baghbazar house, along with Mrs Bull and Miss MacLeod is a memorable cameo. Holy Mother was living as an orthodox brahmin woman and was observing all the traditional rules pertaining to one who had lost her husband. To her the three foreign ladies had come and she could not even speak to them. But language could be no insurmountable barrier with Holy Mother. She had the visitors seated on mats and had refreshments brought in. Sister Nivedita and her friends did not know what to do. With the instinct of a mother, Sarada Devi began to eat, showing her new daughters the way.

This was against the orthodox rules which forbade her to eat in the company of strangers. But who is a stranger in the world of spirituality, in the realm of the Divine Mother? Again, Holy Mother had used the gesture with such a natural grace that the overseas visitors did not even know the significance of the transformatory moment when medieval India

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gave way to the India of today.

With the help of a lady in Holy Mother's entourage who knew some English, a conversation ensued. Sister Nivedita and her friends were put at ease and ananda swirled around for a while. When Holy Mother bade them goodbye, she looked at Nivedita for a while and said simply: 'My daughter, I am glad you came.' The ladies of the area were to repeat the phrase later with great wonderment: 'Do you know, she called her "my daughter" just like the rest of us!'

Such were the unobtrusive ways in which Holy Mother inaugurated a new matrix of time for Indians. There was no violence in this silent revolution, no deliberate insulting of the past. She knew very well how one must distinguish the surface from the essence.

The essence of Indian culture was love, of spirituality, as an upward movement towards new realizations. Only in India could this miracle happen. An apparently illiterate lady from the poverty-stricken rural India who spent all her time in back-breaking domesticity could yet be such a highly evolved soul. As long as the essence was there, why worry about eating in public or not, or about distancing oneself in the name of austere observances?

Reading and listening about Sarada Devi has brought not only comfort to millions but also a rare self-control and self-confidence for the initiates in her *darshana*.

***Holy Mother inaugurated a new matrix of time for Indians. There was no violence in this silent revolution, no deliberate insulting of the past. She knew very well how one must distinguish the surface from the essence.***

### **Her Spiritual Poise**

Her life of purity which we read again and again to purify ourselves teaches several lessons. The finest lesson taught by Holy Mother was on how to achieve absolute self-control under all circumstances. Like the Savitri of yore, she faced all challenging circumstances without any complaint. When it was bandied about in her natal village that her husband was a madman, Sarada Devi, a young girl of eighteen, simply decided to go to Dakshineswar and meet her husband. If the rumours were proved right, she would serve him and bring him back to normalcy. Fever and attendant weakness did not deter her from walking the distance from Jayrambati to Calcutta. I have often imagined how Holy Mother's face must have blossomed as a red lotus when Sri Ramakrishna welcomed her with perfect ease: 'You have come at long last. Alas! My Mathur is now no more. What care he would have bestowed on you!' He looked after her with great care and as soon as she was strong enough, she went to stay in the nahabat. We do not hear of her having loudly complained earlier when she had to endure village scandals or having gone into ecstatic frenzy in Dakshineswar on the discovery of Sri Ramakrishna as a caring husband. This was spiritual poise indeed.

### **The Support Divine**

So Holy Mother became the Vedic Skambha of the disciples who were engaged in transforming the mighty vision of the Master

into a radiant reality. She continued to live a very simple life, close to poverty. Self-denial came to her easily while she poured all her care and love on relatives, friends and disciples. Her presence was enough inspiration, and her occasional words were the very scripture of sincerity. Which one of us can say where lay the secret of her Presence except salute her as the Skambha? Even the Vedic rishis did not know how to describe this support of the universe.

In what limb of his does Tapas lie?

In what limb is Eternal Law established?

Where lies Dedication? Where Reverence?

In what limb is Truth firmly placed?<sup>3</sup>

Ah, Mother, how can a child define its mother? She came from the hamlet of Jayrambati, lived in Calcutta, travelled to holy places and withdrew when the manifestation had to cease. Yet, even today, we turn to that gentle face all the time, illumined by the soft hues of a boundless compassion. The patience and compassion of Mother Earth, Vasundhara, flows towards us even from a mere portrait! She is teaching us all the time how to bring the human and the divine together; and how even when born among flawed humanity, one can become a divine being. Once again, the Vedic Skambha rises before us when we salute Sarada Devi:

Skambha has upheld these two—

Heaven and Earth—

Skambha has upheld the wide mid-air,

Skambha has upheld the six spacious regions,

Skambha pervades the whole world.<sup>4</sup>

### **Her Continuing Presence**

Where has Holy Mother gone? She is here, she is here! She gives us initiation if we hold out our hands to her in supplication, for hers is the unfailing Grace that answers an ardent aspiration. Every movement of hers has been a lesson for all time. As when she prayed in the Radharamana temple that she may not be aware of the faults of others. As when she entered temples like a commoner, intent only

on worshipping the deity. As when she visited the monastery of Bodh Gaya where the Buddhist monks were lodged in comfort, and so prayed to Sri Ramakrishna on behalf of her disciples with maternal solicitude: 'O Lord, my children have no place to lay their heads on. They have very little to eat. They trudge from door to door for a morsel of food. May they have a place like this!'

All the holy tirthas of this great land including Ganga, Jamuna, Kaveri and Tamraparani flowed into her last message, which remains the priceless sadhana shastra for anyone who wants the glory and good of spiritual illumination: 'Why do you fear? You have seen the Master. ... if you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; this entire world is your own!'

An ancient Tamil poet had stated: 'All land is ours; everyone is our relation./ The good and the bad do not come from outside.'

Such indeed is the teaching of India's Sanatana Dharma. The Sri Sarada *darshana* reiterates it not as a mere theory but as a practical Way through the *avatarana* of Holy Mother. Because the Divine Mother had chosen to put on the cloak of an Indian housewife, our path to reach the Life Divine has been made easy. Like the mother who plunges into the well to rescue her child, the Divine Mother plunged into this life and bore the sorrow and struggle of earthly living to rescue us. Because she came and because she is with us, we feel safe in

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this sombre world:

Amid the work of darker Powers she is here.  
To heal the evils and mistakes of Space  
And change the tragedy of the ignorant world  
Into a Divine Comedy of joy  
And the laughter and the rapture  
of God's bliss.  
The Mother of God is master of our souls;  
We are the partners of his birth in Time,  
Inheritors we share his eternity.<sup>5</sup> \*

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## The Lure of Lucre

Such is the fascination of money that if you are too much involved in it, you will not be able to resist its attraction. You may think that any moment you may leave your money behind. No, my child, never harbour any such foolish thought. Through a tiny loophole the attachment to money will enter your mind and then strangle you gradually, without your knowing about it. Always remember Sri Ramakrishna's saying that money is at the root of all disasters you see in the world. Money can lure one's mind into other temptations. Beware!

—Holy Mother

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# Sarada Math: Why Not during Mother's Time?

KUMUD BANDHU SEN

Once a profoundly significant discussion took place between Swami Yogananda and Girish Chandra Ghosh at the Calcutta residence of Balaram Bose. It will not be out of place to present here the purport of this discussion, the contents of which are at once important and thought-provoking. It was about the middle of July 1897. Swami Yogananda had just returned to Calcutta from Almora whither he had accompanied Swami Vivekananda two months earlier. Though he had gone to Almora for a change of climate, Swami Yogananda had to leave that place after a short stay as it did not suit his health. Though outwardly not ill, he was not feeling quite fit. Swami Vivekananda was very anxious for and took all possible care of Swami Yogananda's health. As he told Girish Ghosh later, Swami Yogananda did not like to cause any worry to Swamiji on his account when Swamiji's own health was none too good.

## A Math for Women

In the course of his conversation with Girish Ghosh, Swami Yogananda said, 'Swamiji wants to establish a monastery for women sannyasinis under the direct guidance of Mother. All the women disciples of the Master would be able to live together in the proposed math for women, and other women, including those from the West even, who desire to lead a life of renunciation and meditation may come and live there and derive immense benefit by coming into intimate contact with the living ideals and hallowed associations of the women disciples. The child-widows and aspiring spinsters who wish to dedicate their lives for the realization of the highest spiritual ideals and in the cause of the betterment of the condition of women all over the country will be eli-

gible for membership of the women's math. By the blessings of Mother, who will be their guiding spirit, there will arise among them *brahmavadinis* like Gargi and Maitreyi of old and giant personalities even greater than the past heroines and *brahmavadinis* described in our mythology and history. Mother's glowing personal example of purity and character, her spiritual talks and teachings based on her own realizations, and her ennobling love and care will inspire and elevate the inmates of the proposed math, at the same time instilling in them a new force that will awaken their dormant energy. They will be transformed entirely and endowed with a new vision and realization of their own shakti so that they too can work fearlessly for the highest good of humanity.

## The Highest Expression of Womanhood

'Swamiji told me with great emotion, "Our Mother is a vast reservoir of spiritual energy, though outwardly calm like the deep ocean. Her advent marks the beginning of a new era in the history of India. The ideals lived and taught by her will not only spiritualize the efforts for the emancipation of women in India, but also influence and penetrate into the minds and hearts of women all the world over. Motherhood represents the highest expression of womanhood, especially in India. It is an innate instinct in every woman, the signs of which might be discovered even in a little girl."

'In the West the whole structure of society rested on the wifeness of woman. But motherhood is the true expression of divine love, sublime, noble and broad as the sky. Various heterogeneous ideas and customs have been introduced into Indian society as a result of contacts with various alien races and cul-

tures. This has vitiated the true ideal of motherhood that always obtained in our society, and we have gradually drifted away from the moorings of our ancient ideal in individual as well as communal life. Sri Ramakrishna came amongst us in order to uphold and revivify this great ideal through his own life and realizations. Even in the midst of his varied and austere spiritual practices, in accordance with the injunctions of different religions, Sri Ramakrishna never swerved from the truly noble ideal of the Motherhood of the Divinity. He accepted the Brahmani as his first guide and teacher. While taking to the life of complete renunciation, he never rejected his wife, whom he identified with the Divine Mother, as reflected in his own mother Chandra Devi. He saw clearly in Holy Mother the perfect manifestation of pure love and devotion. She was to him a living embodiment of the Divine Mother. This realization of his was no hallucination or idealization. It sprang from his own personal intuitive experiences in the highest state of spiritual beatitude and God-realization.

### **The Uniqueness of Holy Mother**

'The motherly affection and natural compassion and grace of Holy Mother did not arise from any earth-bound relationship, but radiated spontaneously from the eternal source of love divine, so very characteristic of an Incarnation. Dedicated to the service and welfare of all her children, irrespective of any earthly discrimination, her life truly indicated the ideal of motherhood. Her grace was not limited to her own relatives or devotees at home or in her native village. It was unrestricted and unbounded, and conferred on all who sought for it and came to her. Secular and spiritual duties blended into one homogeneous act of motherly love in her life. Swamiji always spoke highly of this ideal of motherhood, which he said would ennoble women in every country. The contemplated nunnery would be the central organization for disseminating this great ideal under the guidance and inspiration of Holy Mother.'

In reply, Girish Ghosh said, 'It is an altogether new and bold idea of reforming our society and improving the lot of our women. Swamiji's will must be fulfilled and I have not the least hesitation in fully supporting this proposal. But it is an arduous task and hazardous in his present state of health when it is hardly advisable for him to undertake such a strenuous responsibility. We shall of course implicitly follow him in whatever he tells us to do. But his failing health is making all of us anxious and the doctors have strongly advised him to take complete rest.'

### **Why the Women's Math Should Not Involve Holy Mother**

Swami Yogananda said, 'Bodily ill health or any other impediment from any source is not going to daunt or dissuade him from his determination to carry out his plans, which he believes will benefit society and contribute to the well-being of mankind. He has no other thought even in the present state of his health. He only smiles at our anxiety for and worry over the condition of his health.

'After listening to all that he told me of his plan for starting a women's math, I suggested to him, "Do whatever you think will be conducive to the good of society at large; but please do not bring Mother into public prominence now. Don't you remember the Master telling us that his body would not survive if we preached him before the public? The same may be said in respect of Mother too. I do not allow all and sundry to meet Mother or touch her feet while offering their salutations. I see that only sincere devotees of pure character have her darshan. Therefore, I humbly request you, brother, not to disturb Mother at present. You may start the women's math with the help and cooperation of women devotees of spotless character and spiritual realization, also possessing learning and skill in various branches of knowledge and work, who are ca-

pable of taking charge of this organization without any direct association with men as such, not to speak of our sadhus.”

‘As soon as I finished saying this, Swamiji heartily thanked me and smilingly said, “Mantri [minister], you have given me a sound piece of advice and aptly reminded me of the Master’s words in this respect. I shall not disturb Mother. Let her fulfil her mission according to her own will and in the manner she chooses. Who are we to dictate to her? Rather, we can accomplish everything with her blessings. I have personally seen and felt the power of her blessings, which can do miracles.” So Swamiji will not disturb Mother by pursuing his plan to place her as the head of the proposed math for the new order of women sannyasinis.’

### **Mother’s Blessings on Girish**

Girish Ghosh replied, ‘Yogen Swami, you have done yeoman service indeed. Now I see why you accompanied Swamiji to Almora. Yes, Mother’s blessings are always wonderful. Listen, Yogen Swami, I am myself a living example of the wonderful manifestation of Mother’s blessings. Once I fell ill and my condition became serious, the doctors giving up all hopes of my recovery. I used to feel terribly restless owing to severe pain and other symptoms of my ailment. One night I had a strange dream. I saw a woman standing in front of me

and with motherly affection assuring me of my early recovery from the illness and at the same time offering me a liquid medicine to drink. Then the dream ceased and I fell into deep sleep for a long time. Next morning, strange to say, I felt almost all right. My illness had subsided considerably and I was on the way to complete recovery. It was a mystery to me then, as I was still a stranger to such phenomena, having not yet had the privilege of meeting or receiving the blessings of the Master and Mother.

‘Later on, when I visited Jayrambati and saw Holy Mother, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the likeness of Mother was exactly similar to that of the woman I had seen in my dream. I was wonderstruck when it became clear to me that Mother’s affectionate voice and countenance were the same as those of the dream-figure that had ministered to me and comforted me during my illness. Now I distinctly see that it was Mother herself who offered me the medicine in the dream and cured me. It is her grace which brought me into close contact with the Master and thereby enabled me to find shelter at his feet. And it is through her blessings that I have been vouchsafed the privilege of intimate and hallowed association with her and with you all—especially Swamiji—who have renounced everything for Sri Gurumaharaj even at such a tender age.’ \*

### **God’s Name and Karma**

**K**arma alone is responsible for our misery and happiness. ... The result of karma is inevitable. But by repeating the name of God, you can lessen its intensity. If you were destined to have a wound as wide as a ploughshare, you will get a pin-prick at least. The effect of karma can be counteracted to a great extent by japa and austerities. This was the case with King Suratha. He had worshipped the Goddess by slaughtering a lakh of goats. Later on, these one hundred thousand goats killed the king with one stroke of the sword; he did not have to be born one hundred thousand times. That was because he had worshipped the Divine Mother. Chanting God’s holy name lessens the intensity of karmic effects.

—Holy Mother

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# Holy Mother—Some Glimpses

SWAMI SANDARSHANANANDA

**T**he sublime beauty of Holy Mother's personality is too delicate to describe. Words are naive and clamorous, because serenity, simplicity and sweetness constitute the very essence of her divine dignity. To delve into its depths is difficult, and therefore I embark upon this endeavour with much trepidation.

The phenomenon of an incarnation of God is baffling. It is beyond the grasp of common knowledge. Its supernaturalness clouds one's vision unless one is spiritually inspired. So the phenomenon of the advent of Sarada Devi remains unintelligible until the phenomenon of God's descent as Sri Ramakrishna is properly understood. Her temporal actions as Sri Ramakrishna's consort, too, follow the same transcendental law that justifies his unusual activities. A close scrutiny of the events of her life reveals that she unflinchingly espoused the cause for which her husband had assumed human form.

Holy Mother does not, perhaps, get significantly mentioned in works earlier than Sister Nivedita's. In them she is mostly brought in incidentally in the course of narrating the details of Sri Ramakrishna's life. It is Nivedita alone who recognizes with due respect Sarada Devi's immense contribution to human culture as well as to human society, giving Holy Mother a very important place in her writings. In the process, she became the first to draw public attention to Mother by presenting her in her true glory. So I feel I ought to take recourse to Nivedita's works, as often as required, to make my point clear in this brief essay.

## Benign Benediction

Holy Mother, who led a bucolic life dur-

ing childhood and remained in purdah in youth, rose to become the goddess of adoration to numerous hearts. Nivedita, who assiduously traces the path of her meteoric ascension, discovers that 'Holy Mother ... is only a simple Hindu woman, and yet, as I think, the greatest woman in the world today.'<sup>1</sup> The glimpses of Holy Mother's eminence in terms of moral and spiritual greatness, which Nivedita obtained by dint of her close proximity with Holy Mother, equipped her with the ability to present her subject in the true perspective. Its consummation is perceptible in her book *The Master as I Saw Him*, where she unfolds the epitome of Sarada Devi's character in the following words:

To me it has always appeared that she is Sri Ramakrishna's final word as to the ideal of Indian womanhood. But is she the last of an old order, or the beginning of a new? In her, one sees realised that wisdom and sweetness to which the simplest of women may attain. And yet, to myself the stateliness of her courtesy and her great open mind are almost as wonderful as her sainthood. I have never known her hesitate, in giving utterance to large and generous judgement, however new or complex might be the question put before her. Her life is one long stillness of prayer. Her whole experience is of theocratic civilisation. Yet she rises to the height of every situation. Is she tortured by the perversity of any about her? The only sign is a strange quiet and intensity that comes upon her. Does one carry to her some perplexity or mortification born of social developments beyond her ken? With unerring intuition she goes straight to the heart of the matter, and sets the questioner in the true attitude to the difficulty. Or is there need for severity? No foolish sentimentality causes her to waver. The novice whom she may condemn, for so many years to beg his bread, will leave the place within the hour. He who has

transgressed her code of delicacy and honour, will never enter her presence again. 'Can't you see,' said Sri Ramakrishna, to one who had erred in some such way, 'Can't you see that *the woman* in her is wounded? And that is dangerous!' <sup>2</sup>

Nivedita then speaks of Sarada Devi's culture. She is not ready to accept that Holy Mother was 'uneducated', for she could read and 'much of her time is passed with her Ramayana'. She tells about her 'experience in administration, secular and religious'. Above all, 'as the wife of Sri Ramakrishna she has had the highest opportunity of personal development.' But Nivedita's supreme realization regarding Sarada Devi's nature is represented in a letter that she wrote to Mother from America on 11 December 1910. In it she pours out her heart emotionally, and with utmost reverence. The letter was written in connection with the illness of Mrs Ole Bull, about whom she was deeply worried. While seeking Mother's blessings for Mrs Bull's well-being, Nivedita portrays her in poetic language with the admiration of a small girl, which stirs our imagination. I choose to quote it in full, keeping in mind those who may be reading it for the first time.

Beloved Mother,

This morning, early, I went to church—to pray for Sara [Mrs Ole Bull]. All the people there were thinking of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and suddenly I thought of *you*. Your dear face, and your loving look, and your white *Sari*

***The girl was intelligent enough  
to discern the intricate changes  
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and your bracelets. It was all there. And it seemed to me that *yours* was the Presence that was to soothe and bless poor S Sara's sick-room. And—do you know?—I thought I had been very foolish to sit in your room, at the evening service to Sri Ramakrishna, trying to meditate—why did I not understand that it was quite enough to be a little child at your dear feet? Dear Mother! You are full of love! And it is not a flush and violent love, like ours, and like the world's, but a gentle peace that brings good to everyone and wishes ill to none. It is a golden radiance, full of play. What a blessed Sunday that was, a few months ago, when I ran in to you, the last thing before I went on the Ganges, and ran back to you for a moment, as soon as I came back! I felt such a wonderful freedom in the blessing you gave me, and in your welcome home! Dearest Mother—I wish we could send you a wonderful hymn, or a prayer. But somehow even that would seem too *loud*, too full of noise! Surely you are the most wonderful thing of God—Sri Ramakrishna's own chalice of His Love for the world—a token left with His children, in these lonely days, and we should be very still and quiet before you—except indeed for a little fun! Surely the 'wonderful things of God' are *all* quiet—stealing unnoticed into our lives—the air and sunlight and the sweetness of gardens and of the Ganges, these are the silent things that are like you!

Do send to poor S Sara the mantle of your peace. Isn't your thought, now and then, of the high calm that neither loves nor hates? Isn't that the sweet benediction that trembles in God, like the dew-drop on the lotus leaf, and touches not the world?

Ever, my darling Mother, your foolish *Khoo-ki* <sup>3</sup>

Nivedita <sup>4</sup>

### **Intrepid Ingenuity**

As Nivedita's magic pen held Sarada Devi before the public eye, even so did her personal interest introduce Holy Mother to the world through photographs taken outside the conservative milieu of her home. Her most popular picture, which is now worshipped in countless homes, would not have been possible but for the initiative of Nivedita and Mrs

Bull. It was probably the first time that Mother was brought face to face with an unknown person, a photographer. Nivedita sent the photograph to a few of her friends in the West with a note of caution that it was not to be distributed indiscriminately.

What emerges from this is that Sarada Devi did something inconceivable in those days. Would any of her contemporaries, that too a widow belonging to the uppermost caste, dare to come out in the open like that? Could anyone in those days ever imagine that her picture would be displayed before men-folk? However, such a thing does not really appear conspicuous with regard to Holy Mother. Hers was a role prompted by Sri Ramakrishna's mission. Whatever remained to be done after his demise was to be completed by her; she could not afford to remain aloof or inactive. Just as she accepted white ladies, who were looked down upon as *mlecchas*, and made them her own despite running the risk social ostracism, she also ignored many prevalent customs that had lost relevance and were a positive hindrance to social progress. She proved Swami Vivekananda's apprehension wrong. Extremely delighted at Mother's liberal dealings with his Western disciples, Swamiji wrote to Swami Ramakrishnananda in March 1898, 'Shri (Holy) Mother is here, and the European and American ladies went the other day to see her, and what do you think, *Mother ate with them even there!* Is not that grand?'<sup>5</sup>

By and by, Nivedita's understanding of Sarada Devi grew clearer. The more she saw her, the surer she became of Holy Mother's exceptional mettle. She learnt that Mother was not a mealy-mouthed, insensitive woman; rather, she was apt to act sharply when the situation demanded. Nivedita published a photograph of her school in an article which appeared in the *Empress*. For it she had to face a lot of criticism for breaking custom. Mother

came forward to protect her. Nivedita relates this to Miss MacLeod, mentioning also the fact how Mother strongly opposed the false allegations levelled against Swami Sadananda. She says, 'I feel personally indebted—which reminds me—what the Mother is, is only dawning on me now. You should have heard her defend Sadananda against horrid aspersion the other day! And when my zenana article comes out you will realise what it meant when she said quietly that in giving us the poses Santoshini's mother had helped *her*.'<sup>6</sup>

### Mellow Match

If Sri Ramakrishna was the 'apostle of truth and harmony', Sarada Devi's participation in his mission was complementary and constructive. Is it then any wonder that she conducted herself in the manner she did? Their wedlock was a gateway that ushered in

***She blended the secular with the sacred in a well-thought-out proportion to build up her own view of the emancipation of Indian women and the salvation of humanity at large.***

a new era, sowing the seeds of a gigantic movement of which she was in the vanguard. Though there was a difference of seventeen years in their ages, yet it was, in an inscrutable way, a most perfect match: for their affinity and union was divinely ordained. Way back before their actual wedding, while she was still sitting in her mother's lap, little Sarada had identified her partner-to-be in a large gathering. Likewise, Sri Ramakrishna too relieved his troubled relatives when they were looking for a suitable bride for him. He told them that the daughter of Ramchandra Mukhopadhyay of neighbouring Jayrambati was indeed earmarked for him, and that there was no need of further search.

The age difference did not matter at all; the communication between them was so exemplary. The girl was intelligent enough to

discern the intricate changes in her husband's demeanour brought on by his spiritual moods. The boy, too, was confident that his companion would never disappoint or misunderstand him.

But often critics have raised eyebrows over their marriage and tried to make out that Sri Ramakrishna neglected his young wife. They find him even more culpable because of his vow of lifelong celibacy which, in their eyes, denied Sarada Devi the joy of motherhood. But such criticism does not alter the fact that their abstinence was a matter decided by mutual consent. It is the fashion of critics like these to condemn as male chauvinists those who prefer to see things in a different light. To them child marriage is a barbaric act and the most irrefutable proof of male domination. Here, it will not be out of place to explain the rationale behind the Hindu custom of early marriage. What Swami Nirvedananda has said in the context of Sarada Devi's marriage in his book on her is, I feel, quite pertinent and reasonable:

Everything in Nature, even a social practice, has a dark side along with a bright one. The marriage of healthy adults may yield strong and virile children, undoubtedly a valuable asset of a nation; but how far it may contribute to domestic bliss is a questionable proposition. The Hindus, believing in the utility of a joint family as a training ground for the expansion of the heart, chose the other way of securing domestic bliss even at the risk of losing the physical vital-

***Mother too did not have any difficulty in understanding the esteem in which she was held by her husband. When the time came for her to fulfil her spiritual responsibilities, she performed her duties with all dexterity until her last day in flesh and blood.***

ity of the nation. Of course, by way of a safeguard against its probable evil effects, the Hindu social laws enjoin that early marriage is not to be consummated before both the parties attain puberty. So long as this injunction is religiously observed, hardly any objection may be raised against this custom on physical grounds. Now, after marriage a Hindu bride becomes a member of another family, where to keep up harmony she has practically to recast herself in a new set of relations and family traditions. The earlier this is done, the easier becomes the task psychologically. Hence early marriage rather conforms to the requirements of a life of self-denial and service prescribed for a Hindu woman, though it may repel hard-boiled individualists of our days.<sup>7</sup>

### **Patient Perseverance**

If Sarada Devi was to bring forth the child known as the Ramakrishna Movement, she had to be in tune with the spiritual and social ideas of her divine spouse while the baby existed in her womb. And that was beyond the capacity of an ordinary woman. She was chosen for it and she proved her worth. Sri Ramakrishna lifted her out of the rut in which Indian women of the time were stuck.

It was the time when much was to happen that would change the world, extricating it from the medieval to the modern age.

It was the age of French illumination when the spirit of rationalism and individualism dominated European thought. It proclaimed the supremacy of reason over faith, of individual conscience over outside authority, and brought in its train new conceptions of social justice and political rights. A new ideology suddenly burst forth upon the static life, moulded for centuries by fixed sets of religious ideas and social conventions.<sup>8</sup>

The state of ferment through which India was then passing brought about a sort of renaissance in the country. Consequently, conspicuous transformation began to occur in society under the leadership of minds of exceptional intellectual ability. One landmark change observable in this period was the rude

shock dealt to the social customs and spiritual culture of the Hindus. Raja Rammohan Roy revolted against idol worship and sati. He believed in one true God, repudiated the multiplicity of gods and founded the non-sectarian Brahmo Samaj. He never regarded himself as anything but a true Hindu and never questioned the authority of the Vedas. His successor, Devendranath Tagore, 'denied the infallibility of the Vedas and gave the Brahmo Samaj a distinctly sectarian character'. (12) But Keshab Chandra Sen was even more radical. 'He believed in reason as the sole guide for religious and social reform, without any encumbrance of old beliefs and practices. ... The Brahmo Samaj under him openly declared itself as outside the pale of Hindu society.' (12) Factors like these influenced the enlightened and the middle class to develop an outlook of enquiry into everything around them.

It was in the midst of such circumstances that Sarada Devi prepared herself to carry forward the work of social and spiritual regeneration started by Sri Ramakrishna. She blended the secular with the sacred in a well-thought-out proportion to build up her own view of the emancipation of Indian women and the salvation of humanity at large. So it is no surprise to find Holy Mother encouraging Sister Nivedita's work among oppressed women at the behest of her guru Swami Vivekananda. On the contrary, she appreciated their ideas fully and with perfect ease.

Sarada Devi's body, mind and spirit were soaked in the spiritual sentiment of Sri Ramakrishna. In essence, there was hardly any separate identity for her, save her universal affection, which was an expression of her divine motherhood. That too, in a way, was but a demonstration of the untrammelled love of Sri Ramakrishna. For to their earnest devotees both of them were personifications of the Divine Mother's love. If Swami Vivekananda stops with spelling out the word 'love' in his attempt to describe Sri Ramakrishna, he does it inevitably because he realized that in Sri

Ramakrishna the man was missing, giving space to God, the Divine Mother, who is love absolute, beyond thought and speech. Being saturated with the spiritual vitality of her husband and guru Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada Devi was most surely free from even a touch of worldly love. That Sri Ramakrishna was an incarnation of Kali was the firm belief of many of his intimate devotees. Being nearest to him, Holy Mother doubtlessly had the clearest conviction of this fact. It became evident when Sri Ramakrishna left his mortal frame. Mother wailed out in grief, crying 'O Mother Kali! For what fault of mine have you departed leaving me behind?' As a matter of fact, Kali Herself had appeared to Mother in a dream, with Her neck bent to one side to indicate that She too was suffering from the same deadly disease in the throat as Sri Ramakrishna. Gaining such insights as she did from time to time, how could Mother have doubts about her husband's identity?

But the truly grand finale of their relationship was when Sri Ramakrishna installed the Divine Mother in Sarada Devi's being through the Shodashi Puja. 'When Sri Ramakrishna, the Divine Incarnation of the age, invoked the presence of the Divine Mother in Her, and worshipped Her as such, she was elevated in truth and in reality from Sarada, the daughter of Ramachandra, to Sarada, the Holy Mother, the manifestation of the eternal Mother of the Universe, for all humanity to worship.'<sup>9</sup> That day onwards Sri Ramakrishna looked upon his wife with utmost rever-

***Almost all her life was spent within the walls of a house, but she was never a householder. Her mind was attuned to another world from where joy perpetually streamed into her soul. Blessing and beauty ever overflowed her heart.***

ence. Holy Mother would say, 'Ah, how he treated me! Not even once did he tell me a harsh word or wound my feelings! He did not strike me even with a flower!'<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Mother too did not have any difficulty in understanding the esteem in which she was held by her husband. When the time came for her to fulfil her spiritual responsibilities, she performed her duties with all dexterity until her last day in flesh and blood.

### A True Tribute

Sri Ramakrishna's Shodashi Puja has endowed Sarada Devi with the 'mystic majesty of motherhood'. Women of all countries in all times will fall back on her life and pick up lessons. Not only that, in order to gain real peace, people from all walks of life will look up to her. For has she not told us that she is always with us? Has she not assured us that she is the mother of all who have come before, who have come now and who will come in the future?

To conclude, I would like to quote Sister Nivedita's first impressions of Holy Mother, which she wrote in a letter to Mrs Eric Hammond. It is a useful document that gives us a comprehensive idea of what Mother really was to her close associates. Nivedita's description is amazingly graphic for one based on observations made over a short period of less than four months. She arrived in Calcutta on 28 January 1898 and wrote this letter from Almora on 22 May. Though a young lady of alien culture, she had an inborn ability to penetrate the surface of matters. We owe immensely to her analytical mind. But for her sincere work, much precious information regarding Holy Mother would not have seen the light of day.

I have often thought that I ought to tell you about the lady who was the wife of Sri Ramakrishna, Sarada as her name is. To begin with, she is dressed in a white cotton cloth like any other Hindu widow under 50. This cloth goes round the waist and forms a skirt, then it passes round the body and over the head like a nun's veil. When a man speaks to her, he stands behind

her, and she pulls this white veil very far forward over her face. Nor does she answer him directly. She speaks to another and older woman in almost a whisper, and this woman repeats her words to the man. In this way it comes about that the Master [Vivekananda] has never seen the face of Sarada! Added to this, you must try to imagine her always seated on the floor, on a small piece of bamboo matting. All this does not sound very sensible perhaps, yet this woman, when you know her well, is said to be the very soul of practicality and common-sense, as she certainly gives every token of being to those who know her slightly. Sri Ramakrishna always consulted her before undertaking anything and her advice is always acted upon by his disciples. She is the very soul of sweetness—so gentle and loving and as merry as a girl. You should have heard her laugh the other day when I insisted that the Swami must come up and see us at once, or we would go home. The monk who had brought the message that the Master would delay seeing us was quite alarmed at my moving towards my shoes, and departed post haste to bring him up, and then you should have heard Sarada's laughter! It just pealed out. And she is so tender—'my daughter' she calls me. She has always been terribly orthodox, but all this melted away the instant she saw the first two Westerners—Mrs Bull and Miss MacLeod, and she tasted food with them! Fruit is always presented to us immediately, and this was naturally offered to her, and she to the surprise of everyone accepted. This gave us all a dignity and made my future work possible in a way nothing else could possibly have done. Isn't it funny? The best proof I can give you of her real greatness is that she is always attended when in Calcutta by 14 or 15 high caste ladies, who would be rebellious and quarrelsome and give infinite trouble to everyone if she by her wonderful tact and winsomeness did not keep perpetual peace. There is no foundation for this statement in the character of these ladies. It is only my inference about women in general.

Then you should see the chivalrous feelings that the monks have for her. They always call her 'Mother' and speak of her as 'The Holy Mother'—and she is literally their first thought in every emergency. There are always one or two in attendance on her, and whatever her

wish is, it is their command. It is a wonderful relationship to watch. I should love to give her a message from you, if you care to send her one. A monk read the Magnificat in Bengali to her one day for me, and you should have seen how she enjoyed it. She really is, under the simplest, most unassuming guise, one of the strongest and greatest of women.<sup>11</sup>

Sarada Devi lived among the afflicted. She provided them with remedies for their material and moral sufferings. Almost all her life was spent within the walls of a house, but she was never a householder. Her mind was attuned to another world from where joy perpetually streamed into her soul. Blessing and beauty ever overflowed her heart. One who drew from this spontaneous flow was transformed into a gem. Nivedita was one such. Notwithstanding her deep affection for monastic life, she was not initiated into sannyasa by Swamiji. He wanted her to remain a brahmacharini. But Holy Mother once told Nivedita of a dream in which she saw differently. Nivedita related it in a letter to Miss Macleod dated 8 September 1904:

I love those letters in which you tell me some word of His [Swamiji's] that I never heard before. This time it is that He had spent years of effort in training me, such as He had spent on no other. Things like that, make one trustful of oneself. The Holy Mother, too, told a vision lately in which she had seen me—and I was clothed in gerua—in consequence of which I believe that she would give me gerua anyday—but I will not take it. For He gave me only one little thing to guard—brahmacharya—and until life is ended. With that still unbroken, I shall not be sure of victory.<sup>12</sup>

Nivedita noticed that the youth of India

considered Swami Vivekananda the source of new ideas. But she was also convinced that for his plan of work for the masses, especially women, Swamiji borrowed as much from Sarada Devi's life and teachings as he did from Sri Ramakrishna's. Sri Ramakrishna left behind an ambrosia called 'Sarada' for the healing of our worldly maladies. She is not great because of our panegyrics, but because greatness happens to be her own real self which becomes palpable to the person who knows how to unconditionally surrender himself at her lotus feet.

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Devotee: Man cannot do anything by his individual effort. God is doing everything through him.

Mother: Yes, that is true. But is one conscious of this always? Blinded by egotism, people think themselves to be independent agents in regard to action. They do not depend on God. He protects one who relies on Him.

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# Mother Today

PRAVRAJIKA MADHAVAPRANA

**H**oly Mother once regretted that she had such a small frame. 'If I had a bigger body,' she said, 'I could have helped many more people.' This charming and generous revelation was a reference to the fact that the body of a great soul suffers vicariously for the sins of disciples. Tiny and unassuming though she was in her human form, Holy Mother embodied a gigantic personality that seems to be manifesting more and more in today's world. Holy Mother has many facets—disciple and devotee; guru; consort and spiritual successor to Sri Ramakrishna; advisor and key player in his mission; embodiment of divine Power; compassionate Mother; ideal human being—all of which blend into a marvellous whole and perfect person. All of these aspects should be factored into a study of her relevance in today's world. Today, one hundred and fifty years after her birth, we have many books in English about her life and teachings. They clearly show that this tiny form embodied the liberal universal spirit of the age, the timeless qualities of an ideal human being, and the high spiritual attainments of the ancient sages.

## Mother Still Lives

I suspect, though, that her real influence—her impact, so to speak—on us today, comes from the fact that she is still with us, in person, constantly blessing, ever cheering us on. On the day she gave up her body in 1920, the cremation was at Belur Math, and that morning Swami Shivananda had her picture placed next to Sri Ramakrishna's, and the pujari rendered worship to her using the seed mantra of Shakti, the Divine Mother. Then at the end of the day, the great swami spoke to the grieving monks and devotees, concluding with this

statement: 'Where will Mother go leaving her children? She has not gone anywhere; she is now all-pervading. Earlier, when she was in one place we had to take trouble to go and see her, now we need not go anywhere. Wherever we may be, if we pray to her with devotion we will get her grace and see her.' Swami Shivananda was not just uttering words of comfort, he knew of what he spoke. He had seen firsthand her work on earth from the beginning of the Ramakrishna movement when he was just a young disciple of the Master, and he had heard all the stories of her early life either from Mother herself or the people who lived with her.

## The Wellspring of the Ramakrishna Order

We have Ramakrishna monks to thank for taking Holy Mother all over the world, starting in the late nineteenth century with Swami Vivekananda's visit to America. Actually, going farther back, we have Holy Mother to thank for the monastery itself and for Swamiji's coming to America. Yogin Ma, one of Mother's companions, tells us that Mother prayed to every deity in every shrine she encountered that the young monastic disciples of the Master be brought together in a monastery. To this day Ramakrishna monks acknowledge that Mother's prayers to the Master and others brought about the Math and Mission, the twin organization that does so much good in the world today.

## Guiding with a Gentle Hand

In January 1900, towards the end of his work in the West, Swamiji gave a talk in Pasadena, California, on 'My Life and Mission'. In this most unusual talk he gives a fervent tribute to Holy Mother and her place in the move-

ment. He speaks of the humble beginnings of the Math and the Mission; his personal struggle between joining the Math or helping his starving family; and of his fellow disciples as a group of boys with an ideal whom everyone ridiculed except one: Holy Mother. He calls her their Master's wife, 'that lady who was the only one who sympathized with the idea of those boys'. She was, he said, 'even poorer than we were, but she had faith in these boys and their idea of helping India and bringing better days to many lands and foreign races'. At the end of the talk he tells these Americans: 'We have all great respect for her. She never dictates to us.' This was indeed Holy Mother's position. While she was alive the monks and devotees considered her their support and leader, guiding with a gentle hand.

Sometime after Swamiji's death we have an example of her gentle guidance as well as love and support of Swamiji and his work. The head of the Koalpara monastery was encouraging the Swadeshi movement and the boycott of foreign goods, saying that the great Swamiji would have supported such a movement. Mother replied in this telling way:

If Naren were alive the Government would not leave him in peace. They would have locked him in jail. I could not see it and live. Naren was like an unsheathed sword. Returning from abroad he said, 'Mother, by your grace this time instead of leaping across, I went to their country in their own ship. Even there the glory of the Master is evident in abundance! How many virtuous people came to me and listened enchanted to his ideas.' They also are my children. What so you say?

Here in this talk we see her persuasive and courteous speech which Swami Gambhirananda notes in his biography. She is in effect telling her disciple that Western people are his brothers and sisters, not his enemies, and she ends by asking his opinion.

### The Mother of All

Long before this conversation, Mother had realized she was the Mother of all. When

Swamiji's Western women disciples came to meet Mother, they instantly knew they belonged to each other as children to mother, and there was nothing artificial about it. Mother's relationship with Nivedita is particularly tender. Mother was deeply moved and wept when Nivedita died. She said, 'The inner soul feels for the sincere devotee.' But it was not just the sincere devotees who enjoyed Holy Mother's love. Everyone in the world she accepted as her own. She felt it and understood it in a cosmic way. Once a devotee asked her why the Master, unlike other incarnations, passed away leaving her behind. She replied, 'Do you know, my son, that the Master looked upon everyone as the Divine Mother? He left me behind this time to develop the ideal of motherhood on earth.'

### The Twofold Purpose of Her Motherhood

American Vedantins feel very fortunate that Ramakrishna swamis posted in this country knew Holy Mother when she lived on earth, and could not only tell us about her but also could interpret her life and message. Swami Nikhilananda, for example, was her disciple, and also a scholar of Eastern and Western knowledge. In a lecture he gave in New York in 1967, he emphasized the worldwide or cosmic significance of her embodiment as the mother ideal. He named a twofold purpose for her developing the ideal of motherhood on earth: 1) to help men control their carnal desires and 2) to help women regain their forgotten dignity and self respect. Needless to say, these are very prominent issues of our times. The swami went on to make an astounding connection between the earnest beginning of Holy Mother's ministry as a guru, which peaked around 1910-11, and the spiritual awakening of women all over the world. Now, he says, we see many women as writers, artists, diplomats and so on everywhere in the world. He gives Holy Mother the credit for this.

The swami knew world history. He put

Holy Mother in the line of the world's great saints and prophets, dating back to ancient times; and he said she was unique among them in her awesome declaration: 'I am the Mother of the wicked as well as the virtuous.' We see her as such locally, so to speak, as well as globally. Amjad the robber, she said, was her son in the same way the saintly Swami Saradananda was her son. She accepted sinners as her disciples, people whose poison even the great swamis could not digest. She gave these 'wicked ones' the same assurance and love as she gave such highly evolved souls as her disciple Bharatiprana, the first president of Sarada Math. In fact it almost seemed she gave more love and attention to the ne'er-do-wells, the wicked ones.

### **Awakening through Suffering**

Considering Mother and her 'wicked' children worldwide, we are amazed at what she knew and revealed. Mother lived into the twentieth century, a century filled with political oppression, imperialism, world wars, genocide and all such widespread wickedness. Once during the First World War, one of the bloodiest conflicts in history, Holy Mother was talking with a disciple. The disciple was bemoaning the fact that the European war was causing poverty and hardship in India, and Mother ruefully remarked, 'In spite of these sufferings people do not become sensible.' The disciple asked, 'Mother, will this war bring us good?' Then Mother made this cosmic statement, 'When the Lord descends such things happen. How many more will come to pass.' Mother's prophetic words have come true: one disaster after another has inflicted suffering on mankind up to this day. But simultaneous with these horrors, the message of the Master, Mother and Swamiji, along with all of India's spiritual wisdom, has spread around the world—in English, mind you, the language of the British imperialists! As with other incarnations, the Master and Mother's mission is to awaken spiritual consciousness

in people and, apparently, suffering is one of the ways to bring that about. This is what I think Mother implies in this conversation with the disciple during World War I.

### **The Harish Incident—A Viewpoint**

Mother's reactions to the wicked people she encountered on earth were usually patient and gentle. There are a few hair-raising exceptions, however. Once she witnessed a neighbour beating his wife on the street in front of her house, and she shouted, 'Are you going to kill her?' Awestruck, the man stopped immediately.

An even more dramatic occasion involved a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna named Harish who was in a crazed and lustful state brought about by drugs. Mother was alone in her village home when he came and chased her. She ran from him, going seven times around the barn of paddy. Then she turned, knocked him down, put her knee on his chest, pulled out his tongue and slapped him until her hands were red and he was stunned. After this drastic treatment of Mother's Harish came to his senses, stopped taking drugs and returned to being a virtuous man.

People say that these awesome incidents serve to demonstrate that she was the Divine Mother. I think there is more significance than that. It is believed that what great souls do in token form brings about great accomplishments in the world later on. Maybe these strong actions of Mother will deal a stunning blow to two great scourges of modern times: drugs and cruelty to women. Perhaps Mother is setting an example, teaching us that sometimes good people must speak up or fight back at wickedness.

When Mother was living with us her natural state was infinite Spirit, beyond virtue and vice. She dwelt with us to show us that we also are that. This, I think, is what is behind her statement, 'I am the Mother of the wicked as well as the good.'

### As a Role Model for Everyday Life

Once when Mother was husking paddy, a daily task when she was in the village, a disciple asked her, 'Mother, why do you work so hard?' She replied, 'My child, I have done more than is necessary to make my life a model.' Holy Mother as a model, an ideal for spiritualizing everyday life, is a theme many of the Ramakrishna swamis posted here in the United States have emphasized. They themselves have taken her as a model in their lives. Swami Vividishananda once said, 'I did not realize how great Holy Mother was until I came to America and worked closely with all sorts of people and situations.'

Swami Ashokananda took this practical point of view with his American devotees. He said, 'First of all know that Holy Mother is your own mother and is looking after you. Then, learn from her life, try to live your daily life as she did. Be aware of your spiritual nature and do your work and relate to people from that higher vantage point.' He said that Mother proved that we can bear all the trials and tribulations of life and make the right reaction to everyone according to their needs from the very highest spiritual level. All that you need is purity of motive, no expectation of return, and infinite patience and endurance. If you have these qualities, there is no situation in the universe in which you could not live. The swami urged us to study Holy Mother's life and teachings, because we can thereby learn how to be better human beings, and also understand the divinity within ourselves. He said, 'We thrive on those in whom this divinity has been embodied, because thereby divinity becomes more real and concrete to our ordinary understanding.'

Holy Mother proved what she taught, as did the Master, her guru, that we can realize God in this life whatever we are—monastics or householders; learned or illiterate; rich or poor; refined or rough; man, woman or child—wherever we are. It is, in fact, our destiny. As a guru, initiating hundreds, she has put

into the world an enormous spiritual power that will go on working for generations. Her recorded teachings range from simple to highly philosophical. My favourite in the latter category is this: 'In course of time even ideas of God and the like melt away. When the soul is illumined, God and the rest appear to be illusions emerging and disappearing in the process of time. One says, "Mother! Mother!" At last one finds that Mother is pervading the universe; all merge into unity.'

Holy Mother's life is recent history. We first learned about it from people who knew her. Since the centenary of her birth in 1953 many books have been published so that everybody, not just Vedantins, can read her life, enjoy it and decide for themselves what they like best. What delights me the most is the display of the beauty of the human soul—its joy, its wonder, its eagerness to learn and love and serve. Once in a while we catch a glimpse of this wonderful thing within ourselves or in other people close to us. But in Holy Mother the soul shines out from childhood all through her life. And often she evokes this joyful inner being from others like her companions and disciples. I will briefly summarize her life, highlighting a few examples.

### A Glimpse of Her Life

Sarada was a peaceful, affectionate child in a poor brahmin family living in rural Bengal. She happily took part in the hard work of the household and fields, helping raise her brothers, cooking and cleaning while learning as much as she could. From the age of four or five, Swami Nikhilananda relates, she had a passion for purity. There was a tuberose plant near their house, and she would pray, 'Lord, make my character as pure and fragrant as yonder tuberose.' She never quarrelled with her playmates, and she tried to bring peace between those who did quarrel. When she was still small, she helped her father cook and feed famine-stricken people from neighbouring villages. The suffering people and her father's

generosity made a lifelong impression on her. She was betrothed to her divine husband, Sri Ramakrishna, at the age of five. She joined him for some months in his ancestral home when she was about 14. At this time she eagerly learned from him everything from how to run a household and deal appropriately with different people to how to meditate and lead a spiritual life. 'From that time onward,' she said, 'I always felt as if a pitcher of bliss was kept in my heart. I cannot tell you how much and in what way my mind feasted on that steady, unchanging joy.' She considered herself supremely blessed to have such a divine husband. The marriage was one of deep spiritual love, and was never physical. The Master praised her purity for enabling them to have such a marriage. It is no wonder that he worshipped this pure, young woman as the Divine Mother and offered her all his spiritual attainments. She spent about twelve years with the Master at Dakshineswar, serving him and his devotees. Though she lived in incredibly cramped quarters, she was blissful all the time. Years later she was talking to devotees about these days, and her companion, Yogin Ma, remarked, 'Such happiness cannot be described in words.'

Holy Mother lived thirty-four years after the Master's passing, partly in the city, partly in her village of Jayrambati. She took care of her family, which included some crazy people and some greedy, worldly people 'who never thought of God even in a dream' as she humorously put it. She also lived with some highly spiritual companions and disciples who adored her. To all of them she gave from

her inexhaustible pitcher of bliss, each according to need. Often she is described as appreciating something with wonder, or laughing heartily like a child. People who knew her have said that looking at her eyes they would think these are the eyes of a child who does not see right or wrong.

Today we too can see this childlike quality in the many photos of her, as her eyes gaze downward or forward. As with her story, at first her photos were scarce and now they are everywhere. We American Vedantins take pride in the fact that Sara Bull, an American devotee, got the first photos made. Now these photos are worshipped in Ramakrishna Math and Sarada Math shrines and in devotees' homes all over the world. Mother goes everywhere in her infinite formless aspect and the same is true of her pictures. Recently a man just released from prison asked at our San Francisco temple for a photo of Sarada Devi, which he had seen in a book while in prison. He had only ten dollars from his 'transportation home' money, so the cost could not exceed that, he said. Her photo had got him through his ordeal, and he wanted a copy.

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Meditating on all these ways she appears to us, I would characterize Holy Mother's relevance in the world today as a crying need which is being met by her in person. Now she goes everywhere with or without an interpreter, spreading her divine joy and light, and I expect she will do so for many centuries to come. \*

**W**hat shall I say to the Mother? She comes to know everything. My Mother, that Mother of Dakshineswar! Is there any comparison to Mother's grace? Does Mother expect anything from us? No expectation, only selfless compassion—she gives refuge to all so that they may remember God at least in the morning and evening and lead pure lives. Look at this boy who cannot speak and has no home; even him Mother has blessed.

—Swami Adbhutananda

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# Concealed Greatness

SWAMI NITYASTHANANDA

**I** consider [Sarada Devi] to be one of the greatest, nay, THE GREATEST ... achievement of Sri Ramakrishna in this world. She was an ordinary Indian village girl and he made her into an absolutely outstanding personality, which for me is a symbol of India herself. Divine, yet human, a real woman, but saintly, the Mother has an irresistible appeal to me,' writes a Russian scholar.<sup>1</sup>

## The Meaning of *Sri Mata*

We call Sarada Devi Sri Mata or Sri Ma or Holy Mother. It is customary in India to address every woman as mother. But with regard to Sarada Devi, we are not satisfied with just calling her mother. We prefix it with *sri*. Generally *sri* is used to indicate respect. There is a Sanskrit verse on the usage of *sri*: 'The gods, the spiritual preceptor, the place of the spiritual preceptor, a holy place, the presiding deity of a holy place, a realized soul and those who have the competence for realization—these must be preceded by the word *sri*.'<sup>2</sup>

Sarada Devi was a combination of all these. As a great spiritual preceptor, she initiated many into spiritual life and guided them spiritually. She was also worshipped as the Goddess by countless devotees. Wherever she was, people flocked to her, to sanctify themselves by her vibrations of purity, just as they would visit places of pilgrimage. And, of course, she was foremost among realized souls. More than all this, she was the mother of all. Hence the term *Sri Mata* suits her admirably.

## Special Meanings of *Sri*

The word *sri* has many connotations. It means wealth, and Sarada Devi had this in abundance and distributed it freely to her dev-

otees. Of course, the wealth was not material but spiritual. Another meaning of *sri* is dignity and respect. Sarada Devi was known for her dignified bearing, and it was impossible to find anything contrary to it in her words, deeds or behaviour. It is a well-known fact that Sri Ramakrishna held her in great esteem. *Sri* also denotes lustre or luminosity. Sarada Devi had a luminous personality as a result of intense austerity and unsurpassed purity. Drawn by her lustrous personality, many, including Sri Ramakrishna, worshipped her. Even Swami Vivekananda felt it necessary to purify himself with Ganges water before meeting her.

Swami Saradeshananda relates two instances related to Mother's luminous personality and her austere life:

Radhu's mother, 'the mad aunt' (Mami), told us once: 'Before the Mother grew anxious on account of Radhu, she appeared to me like a living Devi. I never dared to approach her. Then my sister-in-law (the Holy Mother) was quite a different person. She was like a goddess. When she would sit on the seat for worship, I could not go near her. I was afraid to do so.'

We have heard from her companions what the Holy Mother was before the advent of Radhu on the scene. Steeped in meditation, she would be bodily shifted from one place to another like a statue by Golap Ma and Yogin Ma, who often kept company with her. She had no consciousness of the body.<sup>3</sup>

The word *sri* also suggests auspiciousness. Sarada Devi's personality was auspicious, her words were auspicious and her very presence was auspicious. She was the very embodiment of purity, and she could infuse that purity in others. Her niece Nalini one day came home in the evening feeling defiled by stepping over some impure things, for which

she wanted to take bath and change her cloth. Since it was winter, Holy Mother dissuaded her from taking a bath. When Nalini was not satisfied, Mother suggested that Nalini could touch her as a means of purification. So confident she was of her purity.

*Sri* again denotes the intellect or understanding. Anyone who reads Sarada Devi's life can vouch for her extraordinary intelligence, highly admired by none other than Sri Ramakrishna himself, who, according to Swami Vivekananda, was the most intelligent person. Again, implying virtue, *sri* aptly describes Sarada Devi.

### 'Do Not Find Fault'

Sri Sarada Devi was completely free from all blemishes, so she could not see any defects

***Sri Sarada Devi was completely free from all blemishes, so she could not see any defects in others. Yet she was wholly bereft of the ego of having no defects, for that ego itself is a defect, from which spring all other defects and which causes one to see defects in others.***

in others. Yet she was wholly bereft of the ego of having no defects, for that ego itself is a defect, from which spring all other defects and which causes one to see defects in others. And this tendency to see others' defects makes the mind restless and ruins interpersonal relationships, which is detrimental to peaceful living in society. So Holy Mother said, 'If you want peace, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults.'

We are more habituated to seeing evil in others rather than good in ourselves. The second is certainly better than the first. It is this negative attitude towards ourselves, our inability to see any good in ourselves, that makes us see evil in others and in everything.

We do not like the unpleasant experience

of seeing our own defects, so we try to forget them or overlook them. But the matter does not end there. The defects get projected onto others, and instead of seeing those defects in ourselves, we see them in others. Says Ken Wilber, one of the greatest contemporary thinkers and psychologists, 'We can project negative qualities, consequently feel ourselves to lack them, and instead see them as belonging to others. ... those things which most disturb us in other people are really unrecognized aspects of ourselves. ... our carping criticisms of other people are really nothing but unrecognized bits of autobiography.'<sup>4</sup>

When our efforts to succeed are frustrated, when we feel an overwhelming sense of loss or when we face insurmountable difficulties in fulfilling our ambitions, which are

quite natural in this competitive world, our normal reaction to such situations is hatred towards the world. But it is not experienced as such; instead we feel that the whole world is against us and hating us. Instead of accepting our own weaknesses and trying to overcome them, we project them outside, which only complicates the problem. Ken Wilber

says, 'We feel the world hates us *only because* we are unaware of the small part of ourselves that gently hates the world.'<sup>5</sup>

With this psychological background, Holy Mother's above-mentioned advice assumes greater significance. When we are dissatisfied with ourselves we try to satisfy ourselves with indulgence in fault-finding. If we have in us a particularly agonizing defect, we become intolerant of it in others. So when we resent others' defects, we must turn within and face those defects in us. Only then we shall be able to forgive others' defects. We must try and forgive others' defects just as we forgive ourselves. That is why Holy Mother said, 'Forgiveness is *tapasya*.'

### Universal Attitude

Holy Mother also added, 'No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own.' Her statement indicates that to make everyone our own, we must abstain from finding fault with them. This is the ideal means of improving interpersonal relationships, which is now at stake due to commercialization of all relationships. Swami Vivekananda said, 'We are all traders. We are traders in virtue, we are traders in religion. And alas! We are traders in love!' Holy Mother's motherly advice is beautifully expressed with an image in a Sanskrit couplet: 'If you wish to make the whole world your own with a single act, restrain the cow from grazing in the field of slander.'<sup>6</sup> (The word *gām* denotes a cow and also a sense organ; here it is used in the second sense, meaning the tongue.)

This reminds us of Epictetus' famous statement 'View yourself as a citizen of a world-wide community, and act accordingly.' Holy Mother exemplified this ideal in her life to an extraordinary degree, pouring out her motherly affection on one and all, irrespective of caste, creed or nationality. No shortcomings or defects of others could check that flow of love even in the slightest degree. She has shown through her life that we must have a healthy relationship with everyone in this world.

### Relating Oneself to Others

This relationship depends upon the nature of our personality. A politician, having a political personality, will have a political relationship with others; a businessman will have a commercial relationship, his thought, word and deed being coloured by the business attitude. So it is with others working in different fields of activity. But it is not necessary that all those who are working in a particular field must necessarily possess related personalities.

The nature of one's personality is mainly determined by the main ideal of life one adopts, which in turn is determined by one's attitude towards oneself. So it amounts to this that our attitude and relationship towards others depends upon our attitude towards ourselves. The nobler our attitude towards ourselves, the nobler it is towards others. As is our identity, so is our interaction with others. Our objective relationships thus are dictated by a subjective change.

Holy Mother developed her personality with universal motherhood as the centre of her being. She identified herself as a mother and developed a relationship with others accordingly. She considered everyone as her own children. She said, 'I am the mother of the wicked as I am the mother of the virtuous.

***The nature of one's personality is mainly determined by the main ideal of life one adopts, which in turn is determined by one's attitude towards oneself. So it amounts to this that our attitude and relationship towards others depends upon our attitude towards ourselves.***

Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself, "I have a mother." Motherliness was so natural to her that whoever came to her would feel that she was his or her own earthly mother. No one was a stranger to her, because she accepted everyone and everything, including animals, within the ambit of her all-encompassing motherhood. When we fail to identify ourselves as someone having a definite personality, we cannot relate ourselves with others properly, and others remain strangers to us. Erich Fromm makes a significant statement: 'As long as any fellow being is experienced as fundamentally different from myself, as long as he remains a stranger, I remain a stranger to myself too.'<sup>7</sup>

### Not an Ordinary Mother

Normally the mother-child relationship is biological. The mother loves her children because they are parts of her own body. As she loves her body, so she loves her children. That is why she expects that they should be healthy, strong and good-looking. Not only that. She expects that, like herself, they too should get married and raise a family. But Holy Mother's relationship with others was not biological, for her motherhood was sanctified by spiritual illumination. So she not only wished the physical well-being of her children, but was also very much concerned about their moral and spiritual well-being. She was very fond of feeding her children, true, but not for the sake of increasing their physical bulk! There was a

***No sins of her devotees prevented Holy Mother from accepting them as her own. A child remains fearless with its mother; for the child the mother is all-powerful. Even so, those who have taken refuge in Holy Mother can remain fearless, being assured of their liberation.***

boy named Gopesh, to whom Holy Mother would not give sweets. When asked the reason, she said, 'He is going to become a sadhu.' Later that boy became a highly respected monk, by name Swami Saradeshananda.

Holy Mother was not intent on binding her children in wedlock. She inspired many youngsters who she knew were destined for monastic life, and she herself gave sannyasa to some of them. Once a member of her family raised objection saying, 'Mother, if you make them monks, Mahamaya will surely be offended.' Holy Mother replied, 'These are godly children, they remain in the world as pure as flowers. What else brings more happiness, tell me? You know what kind of happiness one gets in this world! Your family tribulations

have been gnawing into my bones.'

Generally speaking, mothers are overly attached to their children; they want to possess their children. This possessive tendency prevents them from giving their children the freedom to develop their personalities on their own and choose their own vocation in life. They normally impose their own ideal on their children and insist that the children must follow their will. This is not real love. Scott Peck says, 'I define love thus: The will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.'<sup>8</sup> And Holy Mother's love for others was always for nurturing their spiritual growth. She allowed everyone to grow according to their own ideal, and from their stage of evolution. She never tried to impose her spiritual ideal even on the members of her own family. She loved them with all her heart in spite of their strong worldly propensities.

### Mother and Guru

An ordinary mother does not discriminate against her ugly or physically deformed children. Even if her children are awfully dirty, the mother does not feel repugnant. Instead, she takes them on her lap and cleanses them. But all this care is limited to their physical form. As for their mental deformities or impurities, she is helpless. But Holy Mother was different. She had infinite capacity and patience to cleanse her children of their mental impurities, to remove their mental deformities. Generally the spiritual guru is choosy in accepting disciples. He accepts them after satisfying himself of their fitness, mental purity and so on. But Holy Mother was not only a guru but also, predominantly, a mother. When her devotees protested against the many personal services she rendered them, Holy Mother silenced them with overflowing tenderness: 'What after all have I done

for you? Am I not your mother? Is it not the privilege of a mother to serve her child in every way—even to clean its dirt with her own hand?’ Here the tables are turned: instead of accepting service from her disciples, the guru herself served them.

No sins of her devotees prevented Holy Mother from accepting them as her own. A child remains fearless with its mother; for the child the mother is all-powerful. Even so, those who have taken refuge in Holy Mother can remain fearless, being assured of their liberation. Listen to her words of assurance: ‘Whoever has come here, whoever is my son, is already redeemed. Destiny dare not throw my children into hell. Free yourself from all anxiety by entrusting your future to me. And remember this always, that there is one behind you who will come to you at the right moment and lead you to the everlasting domain.’

In spite of being honoured as a great guru by thousands and worshipped as the Divine Mother Herself by countless devotees, Holy Mother remained simple and unassuming, concealing the aura of greatness that surrounded her. Swami Premananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, speaks about her concealed greatness: ‘The exalted Empress has of her own accord appeared as the indigent woman. She sweeps floors, scours vessels, husks paddy and even removes the leav-

ings of devotees after food. She has been undergoing great hardships at Jayrambati in order to teach the householders their duties. Infinite patience, unbounded mercy and above all the negation of even the slightest trace of egoism.’<sup>9</sup> Her extraordinary greatness lies precisely in her extraordinary simplicity. \*

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6. *Yadicchasi vaśikartum̄ jagadekena karmaṇā;  
Parāpavāda-sasyeṣu gām̄ carantiṁ nivāraya.*
7. Erich Fromm, *Beyond the Chains of Illusions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962), 171-2.
8. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Travelled* (London: Rider, 1997), 81.
9. *Sri Sarada Devi: The Great Wonder* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1994), 36.

A devotee: ‘Maharaj, by seeing his divine state of being I can believe that Sri Ramakrishna was God Himself. But how is it that I cannot comprehend that Mother (Sri Sarada Devi) is the Divine Mother Herself?’ ...

Swami Saradananda: ‘Then you have not been able to correctly comprehend Sri Ramakrishna as an incarnation of God.’

Devotee: ‘Excuse me, Maharaj, somehow this doubt does not leave me.’

Swami Saradananda (*firmly*): ‘Do you then mean to say that God married the daughter of a rustic woman?’

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# Holy Mother as Guru

PROF N V C SWAMY AND HEISNAM JINA DEVI

## Introduction

It is difficult to think of Sri Ramakrishna without at the same time remembering Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. The life of Sri Ramakrishna, the sadhanas he practised and his teachings have been very meticulously documented. There is even more information available about the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda. These two personalities dazzle us with their brilliance and effulgence. Many times, they even make us wonder whether we can ever hope to reach the great heights they have scaled. We can only admire them from a distance.

However, when we think of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, we feel reassured that here is someone more easily understandable, whom we can approach more closely. We feel that she is always there as a refuge for people like us. Thinking and meditating on her is like experiencing the beautiful coolness of the full moon, showering its nectar on all without discrimination.

This should not, however, lead us to the false impression that Mother was an ordinary woman, spiritually not so advanced as Thakur or Swamiji. Like them, she was also a multifaceted personality. She was as much a spiritual giant as the other two, the only difference being that she had voluntarily covered herself with maya to play her earthly role, at the same time revealing in herself the Motherhood of God.

Many times the question is asked: If Holy Mother was such a spiritual giant, how is it that there is no record of her having performed any sadhana like Thakur and Swamiji? The reason is not far to seek. She did not have to do much sadhana to speak of, because she became the repository of the fruits of Tha-

kur's sadhana on the eventful day in 1872, when Thakur worshipped her as Shodashi and surrendered the results of his entire sadhana at her feet. There was thus no need for her to repeat all the spiritual experiments done by Thakur earlier. However, she had to undergo a practical training, necessary for her to become a guru, and this was provided by Thakur himself. Therefore, it is usually said that she was Thakur's first disciple, though it is more appropriate to call her one of his two spiritual heirs, the other being Swamiji.

## The Training of Sarada Devi

Even at the time of the Shodashi Puja, Sri Ramakrishna had realized that Sarada Devi had spiritually advanced to a high level. He knew that a time would come when she had to take over from him the task of spiritual ministrations. At the same time, he was also engaged in training Swami Vivekananda to become his mouthpiece for spreading his gospel around the world. Future events showed how effective Thakur was in these two tasks of preparing his messengers.

Sri Ramakrishna's training of Sarada Devi is something unique in the field of hagiography. Even if we accept the fact that she was his first disciple, we should remember that Thakur did not confine the training only to spiritual matters. In his eyes, Mother was an incarnation of Sarasvati, the Goddess of Knowledge. She did not really need to be taught anything, but only needed to be reminded of her true nature. There is an interesting anecdote in this connection. One day, Thakur was talking to Mother and his niece Lakshmi about some spiritual matters. Lakshmi was all attention, whereas Mother was dozing. Seeing this, Lakshmi gestured to Thakur whether she

should wake her up. Thakur shook his head and said, 'Do not wake her up! Let her sleep. If she hears what I am saying, she may suddenly recollect her true nature and go back to where she came from!'

But still, certain aspects of spirituality had to be explained to her. As we go through the *Gospel of the Holy Mother*, we come across many passages in which she recollects many things told to her by Thakur. These passages also reveal another aspect of the training. Thakur told many things to Mother, which appear to us mundane, but are full of significance as later events reveal. To give just one example, he once told her, 'You will stay at Kamarpukur; you will grow pot-herbs, eat your rice with greens and call on Hari. Mind you, don't stretch your hand to anybody even for a dime. You will have no lack of coarse food and cloth. Once you stretch your hand for a dime from anyone, you sell your head to him. Even if any of the devotees should offer to keep you in his house with love and respect, you should not give up your own home at Kamarpukur.'

Sri Ramakrishna was aware of the part to be played by Sarada Devi after his departure. He knew that she would have to become the spiritual guru of many people, both sannyasins and householders. He had already explained to her the significance of mantra and japa. Mother herself had become highly proficient in japa. He also gave her different mantras to suit various individuals who would approach her later for initiation. Thakur was aware of Sarada Devi's tender motherly heart, which could not refuse anything to anyone approaching her. He knew that she would be unable to refuse the demands made on her by all and sundry for initiation.

There is a very interesting anecdote to illustrate this point. Once, when Mother had prepared food for Thakur and was about to

carry it from the nahabat to his room, a woman of ill repute came to her. Knowing that Mother was taking food to Thakur, the woman pleaded with her to allow her to carry the food instead. Mother readily agreed. But Thakur found that he could not swallow the food brought by the woman. Sitting near him, Mother saw that Thakur could not even touch the food. 'What have you done!' he exclaimed. 'Don't you know she leads an immoral life?' Thakur took objection to Mother's action and asked her not to repeat such mistakes in future. But Mother replied, 'If someone addresses me as "Mother", I shall not be able to refuse.' Thakur was thus aware of the warmth

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of Mother's heart. He knew that hundreds of people would come to her seeking spiritual initiation and that she would never refuse any request.

### **Her Spiritual Ministration**

After the Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi, Sarada Devi had to face great difficulties. However, thanks to Swami Saradananda's efforts, an accommodation in Calcutta was arranged for her on the top floor of the Udbodhan House in 1909. This made it possible for her to divide her time between Kamarpukur, Jayrambati, Koalpara and Udbodhan. It thus became easy for her to carry out her spiritual ministration in a very effective manner in all these places.

It is indeed strange that a woman who could hardly sign her own name could be a

giver of Knowledge, *jnanadayini*, an epithet given to Sarada Devi by Sri Ramakrishna himself. This only goes to show that Self-realization, not theoretical knowledge, is the index of spirituality. As Thakur himself used to say, all knowledge reveals itself to a Self-realized person. This fact is most evident in Sarada Devi's case.

We have already seen how Sri Ramakrishna identified Sarada Devi with Sarasvati, the Goddess of Learning, who had come down to earth to impart Wisdom. This task she took upon herself voluntarily. Ordinary gurus can only give mantras and maybe some instructions to their disciples. Very rarely does one find a guru prepared to take full responsibility for the disciple. Sarada Devi was a true guru who took upon herself the responsibilities of her disciples consciously and under-

***One has to be very careful in understanding the teachings of great people. Without proper reference to context, the teachings may appear to be meaningless or contradictory.***

went immense suffering in exchange. In her own words:

Do you think ... I can have any respite till any of the souls whose responsibilities I have accepted is left unredeemed? I shall have to be by their side. I have accepted the burden of all their merits and demerits. It is no fun to impart initiation. What a burden one has to take upon one's shoulders, and how much thought one has to bestow on them! ... The Master is making diverse people play in diverse ways; and it is I who have to bear the brunt. I can't possibly leave those whom I have accepted as my own.

That was Sarada Devi the guru. Unfortunately, her sincerity was not matched by many of her disciples who would neglect to practise japa. Therefore, she carried on constant mental japa, even though it meant loss of sleep at night. One day, one of her brahmacharin attendants asked her why she did not get good

sleep at night. She replied, 'What can I do, my son? The boys come and entreat me eagerly. They take the mantra and go home. But nobody does japa regularly. Some don't do it even once. Yet, as I have shouldered the burden, should I not look after them? That is why I do japa and pray to the Master.'

Superficially, this appears to be an extreme view taken by Sarada Devi. After all, the job of a guru is only to point out the way, to initiate the disciple and set him off on his journey towards the goal. The guru has no further role to play, because it is the duty of the disciple to do sadhana. If he fails to do so, he will be the loser. Why should the guru be concerned at all?

But Sarada Devi was of a different view. Talking to Brahmachari Rashbehari in February 1913, she said, 'Energy is transferred

through a mantra; the guru's goes to the disciple and the disciple's comes to the guru. That is how sin is accepted through the imparting of mantra and the body gets so many diseases. It is a hard task to be a guru; one has

to take over the disciple's sins. The guru has to take a share if the disciple commits a sin. If the disciple is good, the guru is also benefited.'

This did not prevent Sarada Devi from initiating a large number of disciples. Even though she had been advised by Sri Ramakrishna to exercise care in granting initiation, the mother in her would throw all caution to the winds and accept disciples from all walks of life. There were women of ill repute who were initiated by her, even though there were protests from her companions. Rarely, however, she would refuse to initiate some people. Once she told Yogin Ma, one of her constant companions, 'How can I explain, Yogin? The body becomes soothed when some people touch my feet, while it is on fire as it were when others do so, and I don't get relief unless I wash my feet with Ganga water.'

Once it so happened that three devotees

came to meet Holy Mother in Jayrambati with a letter from Swami Brahmananda. That day she was suffering from rheumatism and refused to initiate them. But they persisted in their request. Mother refused them again and again, because she had her own suspicions about the character of the devotees. In the end, however, she agreed and gave them initiation. This incident came to the attention of Swamis Brahmananda, Premananda, Shivananda and Saradananda. Swami Premananda is supposed to have exclaimed, 'Mercy, mercy! It is by this glorious compassion that Mother is protecting us forever. We can't express in words the poison that she has accepted. If we had done so, we would have been burnt down to ashes.'

Why did Sarada Devi give so much importance to japa? Many people used to ask her this question and she used to give answers depending upon the nature of the questioners. Mother gave a very high place to japa among spiritual practices because, according to her, japa removes the bondage of karma and leads to liberation. She also used to say that one should persist in japa even though no tangible results are observed in the initial stages. One should do mantra japa at least fifteen to twenty thousand times a day before it showed results. This was the advice she gave people who came to her complaining that japa had not helped them in any way. She also used to recommend that mantra japa should be done with devotion and surrender to the Divine.

Sarada Devi used to make a distinction between the guru who initiates and a teacher who instructs. One can have any number of teachers for general instruction in spiritual life, but there could only be one guru for initiation, and one should stick to the mantra received from him. There were many instances where she could easily detect that the person coming to her for initiation had already been

initiated earlier by somebody else. To such people she would prescribe the continuation of japa of the earlier mantra. But, once in a while, Holy Mother was also seen to give a new mantra.

Holy Mother could identify the ishtadevata of aspirants for initiation. There are several instances in her life where she was called upon to exercise this power. When a young man approached her for initiation, she asked him about his family deity, which he did not know. She meditated for a moment and gave him a mantra. It was later found that this was the mantra of the ishtadevata of his family. In another case, a devotee requested her for a Shakti mantra. But Mother knew that for him the Rama mantra was more suitable. Accordingly, she initiated him in that mantra. It later turned out that this mantra was the one his ancestors used to recite! In yet another case,

***Sarada Devi was not a conventional kind of guru. She was also a mother to her disciples and devotees. Sometimes it became difficult to separate the guru from the mother in her.***

when a disciple asked for a Vaishnava mantra, Mother was able to detect that the person belonged to a family who were earlier worshippers of Shakti. She then gave him a Shakti mantra explaining to him the reason.

Many times the instructions Sarada Devi used to give to her disciples appeared contradictory. Sometimes she would say that unless the mantra is repeated at least twenty thousand times a day it would not have the desired effect. To some others, she would say that the repetition of the mantra 108 times a day was more than adequate. If one were to go into the details, one would appreciate the reasons behind such apparently contradictory advice. Devotees are of various types. Some of them have developed interest in God and the repetition of His name for the first time in their life. Such people require rigorous practice. They need to do japa regularly and without fail as

many times as they can every day. Then there are others who are still doubtful about the existence of God but take initiation out of curiosity or compulsion. Such people also need to take japa seriously.

As one progresses in japa, one's mind gradually gets adjusted to it. There arises in the minds of such people a sense of surrender to the Divine. Wherever Sarada Devi noticed such an attitude, she would ask the devotee to do japa regularly but not bother to count how many times. In the case of devotees who had surrendered themselves to the Divine completely, she used to prescribe repetition of at least 108 times. However, at the same time, she would tell such people to do japa always. The repetition of the mantra 108 times was then done as a mark of respect to the initiating guru. The continuous japa in the case of such devotees was because japa had become second nature to them.

This is the reason why one has to be very careful in understanding the teachings of great people. Without proper reference to context, the teachings may appear to be meaningless or contradictory. Similar instances can be seen in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. He was very strict about japa and meditation so far as most of his disciples were concerned. It was only in the case of Girish Chandra Ghosh that he made an exception by asking him to hand over the 'power of attorney', so that he didn't need to practise japa or meditation. But such instances were rare. Even in Girish's case, the 'power of attorney' bore fruit only gradually as he learnt to surrender to Thakur.

The question then arises, Why did Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi have to practise japa even though they were realized souls? This is all the more true in the case of Holy Mother, who has mentioned several times that she used to do japa a hundred thousand times a day. On being asked about it, she would remark, 'So many people come here to be initiated. Most of them do not practise regularly. Therefore, I do the japa on their behalf so that

they may not lose the benefit of the mantra.' This is an illustration of what Sri Krishna refers to in the *Bhagavadgita* as *lokasangraha*, or welfare of humanity.

Sarada Devi's spiritual ministration had its comic aspects too. Two examples can be quoted here. One day, a woman while taking leave of Holy Mother caught hold of her feet and bit her big toe very hard. Mother cried out in pain and asked her why she did that. Said the woman, 'That was just a way of making you remember me'! The other incident is even more comical. One day a devotee came to see Holy Mother at Udbodhan. Mother had just finished her worship and was sitting on a cot with her feet hanging down. She covered herself with a thick wrapper as soon as the stranger entered her presence. The devotee sat cross-legged in front of her and began his elaborate worship—with mantra and ritual!—unmindful of the discomfort he was causing her. It was a hot summer day and Mother started perspiring heavily. She was feeling miserable, but being too modest she did not remonstrate. This went on for quite some time until Golap Ma happened to pass by. Seeing what was happening, she angrily scolded the devotee and sent him out.

Sarada Devi was not a conventional kind of guru. She was also a mother to her disciples and devotees. Sometimes it became difficult to separate the guru from the mother in her. It was the experience of many that they would hardly remember her role as guru, being completely overwhelmed by her motherly love and affection. In this sense, one can say that she represented the Motherhood of God. However, during her own lifetime, only a few people could recognize this facet of hers. This was because she voluntarily covered herself with maya in order to carry out her play.

Immediately after Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi, Sarada Devi developed a sense of renunciation and thought of terminating her play. At that time, she had a vision in which Thakur showed her a small child and

told her that that was Yogamaya, who would bind her to the earthly plane. This is the reason why she imposed upon herself her own maya and led an ordinary life of a housewife. It was only when she permitted herself to be understood that it was possible for people to recognize her real nature.

Such people as were fortunate enough to realize Holy Mother's divinity used to approach her for initiation. But most of the time people went to her for blessings or favours, which she would grant without any hesitation. This should not lead us to the false impression that she was indiscriminate in showing her blessings.

An incident shows how pragmatic Sarada Devi was in this regard. One day the wife of Doctor Kanjilal, one of her intimate disciples, prayed to her, 'Mother, please bless that your son (meaning Kanjilal) may have more income.' Mother replied, 'My daughter, have I to bless that people should fall victim to diseases and suffer? My child, I shall not quite be able to bless that way. May all be well, may there be good unto the world.'

The life of Sarada Devi was indeed a life steeped in spirituality. She is an inspiration to countless men and women, showing them how to live everyday life and yet be highly spiritual. Her life was one of toil and suffering for the sake of others. But internally she was all calmness and at peace with herself.

The worldly attachments displayed by her were a camouflage to hide her real nature, which began to assert itself as her play reached its end. It is only at that time that people around her realized how she was slowly withdrawing herself from the world.

A few days before her mahasamadhi, a woman devotee asked Holy Mother what would happen to her devotees if she were to leave the body. In a tender but feeble voice, Mother replied, 'What fear is there? You have seen the Master. What fear can there be for you?' She stopped for a brief moment and then spoke her last words, 'But one thing I tell

you: if you want peace of mind, my daughter, don't find fault with others, but rather find fault with yourself. Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear; the world is yours.'

## Conclusion

We have discussed Sarada Devi's role not only as guru, but also as mother. Indeed, she represents the Motherhood of God in all its aspects. In this context, one should remember that Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma is the only major religion of the world that stresses this aspect of the Divine. Every religion has its own quota of saints, male or female. But very rarely does one come across a spiritual Mother of the calibre of Sri Sarada Devi.

We are indeed fortunate that through her life and sayings we get a glimpse of the infinite mercy of the Divine. How much more fortunate must have been those who were eyewitnesses to her lila! We must be grateful to them for the record they left behind in the form of their reminiscences, so that we can now benefit by them.

One hundred and fifty years ago, this Divine Light of the Motherhood of God dawned on this world. Even though Its physical manifestation is no longer with us, the effulgence of the Light continues to shine on, undiminished in Its intensity, illuminating the lives of all those who seek shelter under It. May That protect us always! \*

## Suggested Reading

1. Swami Gambhirananda, *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1986).
2. *The Gospel of Holy Mother* (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1984).
3. *Sri Sarada Devi: The Great Wonder* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1994).
4. Swami Tanmayananda, *The Compassionate Mother Sri Sri Sarada Devi* (Malaysia: Sri Ramakrishna Sarada Sangha, 2002).

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# The Solution to the Growing Malaise of Our Times

SWAMI SATYAMAYANANDA

## The Vise-grip of Loneliness

**T**he increased scientific knowledge of today has revealed the vast and complex interconnectedness of all phenomena, sentient and insentient. Interconnectedness, interplay and interaction hold sway on all levels of the universe right down to the subatomic. A recognition of this fact has, of course, existed all along human history as a subconscious urge to combine; only now it can be scientifically demonstrated. Humanity has now begun to consciously use its knowledge of such processes to improve itself and the surrounding world, and this has had a tremendous impact on the very way we look at things. It cannot be otherwise, for the individual and the collective are inseparably moulded.

This interconnectedness has, however, not been able to penetrate, so to say, a stubborn layer of the psyche that negatively reacts by barricading itself against the cosmic flow of phenomena. The result is, it finds itself isolated, alienated. As present-day society and life get increasingly punishing and impinge harshly on this alienated section of the psyche, it seems to recoil in greater fear and apathy. This is the paradox of our times: on one side we are one big interconnected family—*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*—talking about globalization and oneness with the universe; but the other side reflects the malaise of our times: loneliness and boredom. This is eating into all levels of society like cancer. A mild feeling of loneliness now and then is part of growing up, for it shapes and girds us up for future struggles. But it ought to stop there or it will become a downward slide into the void.

Some psychologists say this malaise, this aberration, helps protect the organism from

ills like anger and anxiety—as though loneliness were preferable. Then there are philosophers presenting their own learned opinions: loneliness is a response of the psyche to the meaninglessness of life. Sociologists interpret loneliness and helplessness as due to the fact that people experiencing them have been cut away from the mainstream of society. This interpretation is not a happy one as people in the mainstream also get lonely. Whatever be the reason, what was acute among the sick and the aged is now affecting everyone, including the very young, and in some people it has become chronic. Loneliness, alienation and boredom is felt perhaps more in modern, developed and advanced societies. Swami Vivekananda puts it briefly: ‘Never were harder blows hit than at the present time, never was competition keener, never were men so cruel to their fellow men as now.’<sup>1</sup> Mankind is probing the staggeringly vast stellar universe and the infinitesimally minute world of subatomic particles, but—here comes another paradox—yet cannot look into its own depths. Scientific man gropes in the darkness of his own soul. We are not yet psychologically competent to handle our own ingenuities and discoveries. Swami Gambhirananda in his book *Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi* makes a pertinent observation that the fact that Sri Ramakrishna and Sarada Devi ‘incarnated to lead the modern world out of its psychological chaos is worth serious notice’.<sup>2</sup>

## Solitude versus Loneliness

There comes occasionally, and often predictably, a time in one’s life when one needs to be left alone. Even during the day we find that we want some time for ourselves to shut out the constant societal pressures. This by itself is beneficial: it has a therapeutic effect on the

personality, helping it in righting its bearings, in conserving energy, in being creative and introspective. This we may call solitude. Loneliness, on the other hand, is a negative state of being miserable and unhappy, characterized by a failure to connect with people and things around and an unhealthy 'retreat into a shell'. Loneliness is a slow and silent killer; it weakens the immune system and depresses the nervous system. Truly it is crushing to feel unloved, unwelcome and unwanted even by one's kith and kin. Loneliness is no respecter of wealth or poverty, literacy or illiteracy, of class, caste or nation. It also tends to make the subjects irrational, suicidal and alcoholic. The subject could take to drugs and, if the condition is acute, even commit murder. Of course there are always ups and downs in life, but in modern society the ups and downs are wild. At no time in history was humanity so advanced and yet at the same time so vulnerable psychologically. Unfortunately, this psychological morass that humanity finds itself in cannot be overcome merely by its remarkable intelligence or technology or other quick-fix techniques.

### **The Cover of Pseudo-spirituality**

Instead of participating in the great cosmic drama and experience the joys of shared confidence, the security of selflessness and the dignity of dependence, people generally 'protect' themselves by becoming parts of 'the lonely crowd' and lose touch with the realities of life. There are some who, in their attempt to escape loneliness, get mired in false spirituality, which too springs from frustration, misguided passion or just weak nerves. Then there are others who, to fill the inner vacuum, become self-righteous, sanctimonious, selfish and singular. The worst are those whose so-called spirituality is nothing but a deliberate deception, which after some years becomes habitual. We need not go into further classification, but suffice it to know that all these types sweep their faults, falsehoods and foi-

bles under the carpet of self-delusion and live in a make-believe world.

### **Holy Mother's Role in Our Lives**

It goes without saying that this state of affairs needs a major overhaul. Ordinary methods like counselling, psychoanalysis or medical care are of no real help here. First, the cleaning process has to be done with great delicacy, care and solicitude; otherwise our conscious mind could get frightened at the dirt that must surface when the process is on. Second, it has to be done by someone whose understanding penetrates us through past, present and future. Lastly, it has to be a labour of love without any motive other than our uplift. It needs someone who understands us and sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, who does not criticize or scold us when we stumble, who weeps along with us in our sorrows and laughs with us in our joys, who encourages us in our strengths, who inspires our minds to love and who has at the same time the required capacity to lead us beyond the chaos we find ourselves in—but does all this slowly, gently. 'Once a direct disciple of Thakur was so offended with the conduct of a certain devotee that he requested Holy Mother not to allow him to get anywhere near her. But she replied, "If my son wallows in the dust or mud, it is I who have to wipe all the dirt from off his body and take him to my lap."' (368)

This is where Sarada Devi the Holy Mother comes in, for no ordinary mortal can be equal to the task of accommodating and regenerating so many different minds. She was Sri Ramakrishna's greatest gift to humanity and it was his infinite compassion that made him leave behind his divine consort to demonstrate his teaching in practice. This, coupled with her inherent mother-heart, has totally revolutionized Sri Ramakrishna's message. What a stupendous force Holy Mother has released to raise humanity, and today the world is getting a faint inkling of this. This unassuming form of Mother has, as it were, added

meaning and purpose to our lives. She was so natural, loving, enduring, compassionate, intelligent, practical and forgiving. All that we consider vile, wanton, weak and wretched in us, all that is secret and bad, deceptive and hypocritical, fit only to be hidden away, to cover which we waste so much of our energy—with Holy Mother in the picture, nothing of these need frighten us. We don't have to blush or apologize or get nervous and agitated anymore. Now we can breathe a sigh of relief and just let go. Holy Mother was once heard telling one of her children, 'My son, if a thorn pricks your foot it hurts me like a spear entering my heart.' (366)

### **Mother's Heart**

Holy Mother knew she would have to go through a thousand hells for our sake. All her purity, holiness and divinity were submerged in her great mother-heart in order to lift her children. Naturally, she knew us before we knew her. In her own words, 'I can't contain myself when one draws near and calls me Mother.' (366) Furthermore, 'her infinite motherhood left none outside its all-comprehensive grasp. Brahmachari Rashbihari asked her one day, "Are you the Mother of all?" "Yes," replied the Mother. "Even of these lower creatures?" pressed the inquirer. "Yes," answered the Mother.' (363) In today's world, raising a couple of children drains out a mother! Imagine Holy Mother having to raise all her children. How inexhaustible she must be! When we look at Holy Mother's picture the first thing that we feel, sometimes very tangibly, is the unmistakable pull of the spiritual umbilical cord that attaches us to her. And as we get more and more acquainted with her various aspects, her life and mission among us, the feeling become palpable. The first thing this feeling eradicates is loneliness, for we now realize that there is someone behind us who takes care of even the most insignificant details of our lives. And if, due to habit, old tendencies make their presence felt in our minds,

her assurance, 'My child, remember you have a Mother,' cheers up our hearts. In the face of such tremendous hope all our superficial encrustations fall away and we emerge cleansed, safe and happy to share the joy with Mother and her children.

### **Children's Feeling for their Mother**

Sarada Devi's birthplace Jayrambati was seasonally attacked by malaria and was susceptible to deadly contagious diseases. The hamlet only had primitive houses and roads. Its inhabitants were extremely poor and frequently had to face drought and famine. It had no sanitary or health-care facilities and had only a rustic school. Should we turn back the calendar by a thousand years, the scene would perhaps remain unchanged. Habitats of the Indus Valley Civilization were definitely more advanced. In fact, Jayrambati told rural India's millennium-long sad story. There was a lack of everything that goes to make social life decent and dignified. As Holy Mother grew up she had to do all the household chores and raise her younger brothers. Cast-iron orthodoxy stifled her free spirit and large heart. Her life at Kamarpukur after Sri Ramakrishna's mahasamadhi would make the stoniest heart ache to see her neglected, hungry and poor. Later she had to live with her mentally unbalanced nieces, put up with her sister-in-law's behaviour and suffer because of the greed and selfishness of her own brothers. Add to this her numerous bouts of illness from which she took a long time to recover. In sum, her outer life was one of such hardship that a tiny fraction of what she had to endure is enough to shake the bravest of men.

When we read about this side of Holy Mother's life it makes us restless and impatient. It is like the child who, on noticing its mother suffering, reaches out to comfort her by throwing its little arms round her neck, kissing her and trying to wiping away the tears. The child suffers when the mother suffers, and to raise her spirits lisps words of con-

solation and comfort. For don't their hearts beat as one? This is also how Holy Mother draws her children to her. 'She was often heard calling in a low tone, "Come to me here, my children."' (363) What can be more wonderful than this! A child may not comprehend spirituality but it *does* understand love.

We learn another great lesson from Mother's life: no external circumstance was ever allowed to break her equipoise. She was always calm, dignified, cultured and sweet to everyone. This quality reflects extraordinary psychological integration.

### Mother's Equal Love

According to Hinduism the highest state of spiritual realization is that of a knower of Brahman. Hindu scriptures exhaust themselves in trying to extol this state and its experienter. Yet Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna's other illustrious disciples, who we know had attained those lofty heights and who were towering spiritual giants, used to be filled with childlike awe and reverence before Holy Mother. It is perplexing to some and heartening to others to see such great souls prostrating before Mother and imploring her grace.

On the other hand, social outcasts approached Holy Mother in Jayrambati confidently, without any fear. Maybe they were unaware of Mother's greatness, but to her it did not make any difference. All had an equal place in her heart. She loved to watch her children eat and would even clean up the place after meals, never minding the fact that her children were of the so-called low caste. There was never—there can never have been—even a hint of distinction in her love. Even the fallen, the morally depraved, found a place in her heart. Here was Mother, who, Swami Brahmananda said, 'has in her keeping the key to the knowledge of Brahman,' but opening her heart to all her innumerable children whatever the condition they were in. Amazing! We don't need logic and deliberation here

but only reciprocation.

### Mother's Real Nature

It may even be said that Sri Ramakrishna prepared the world for Holy Mother to take over. Her mission began the day she was worshipped as the universal Divine Mother, on the Phalaharini Kali Puja day of 1872. Once Girish Ghosh in a mood fired with devotion said to the other devotees in Mother's presence, 'It is difficult for human beings to believe that God can incarnate in a human form like our own. Can you realize that you are standing before the Mother of the Universe in the form of a village woman? Yet she is Mahamaya, Mahashakti—the Mother of the Universe—appearing on the earth for the salvation of all creatures and at the same time exemplifying the ideal of true motherhood.' (219-20)

Swami Vivekananda writes about a deep realization he had while in Almora in the Himalayas: 'Just as the individual soul is encased in the living body, so is the Universal Soul in the Living Prakriti [Nature]—the objective universe. ... This dual aspect of the Universal Soul is eternal. So what we perceive or feel is this combination of the Eternally Formed and the Eternally Formless.'<sup>3</sup> Here we get an idea of the dual aspects of creation: external and internal, gross and subtle, immanent and transcendent, matter and Spirit. A keen student of Holy Mother's life can discern this dual aspect, the phenomenal and the transcendental, in her life too. However, making such a clear division is actually impossible. Both aspects belong to one and the same reality and each side is equally important. Swami Vivekananda spoke from experience and so did Girish Ghosh; both are true perceptions.

In Holy Mother's life we come across several instances where both her human dimension and her transcendental divine nature stood revealed simultaneously. To mention one incident: Once when Mother's niece Radhu was ill, Mother wanted to consult Swami Maheshwarananda (Vaikuntha Maharaj),

who also happened to be a reputed doctor. Mother asked Swami Haripremananda to accompany her to Bankura where the doctor swami was the head of the ashrama. Mother and her party rented a small house nearby and the treatment began. It was late one night and Mother was seated on a low stool. Swami Haripremananda sat down on the floor and gently began massaging Mother's feet in the dim light. He looked at her feet, so worn, with veins standing out, and wondered if Holy Mother really was the Mother of the Universe. How old Mother's feet looked. Suddenly he noticed that his hands were now massaging a pair of feet which no longer appeared to be those of an old woman. The beautiful well-formed feet were soft and luminous, with toes adorned with jewels and perfectly shaped nails! The astonished swami raised his eyes to look at Mother's face, and what he saw dazzled him. He was looking at the Divine Mother Jagaddhatri Herself! The face was radiant and calm. She had three eyes and four hands holding weapons. Shouting 'Mother! Mother!' Swami Haripremananda lost outward consciousness. When he returned to normal consciousness he found Holy Mother in her familiar human form, rubbing his back gently, saying, 'O Hari! What happened to you? Get up.'<sup>4</sup>

This transcendental form of Holy Mother, which Sri Ramakrishna and his direct disciples often spoke of, implies that her children too have a transcendental form. For like begets like and Swami Vivekananda's experience of the individual soul (our transcendental form) enclosed in the living body states this very truth. But it must be kept in mind that both these forms are eternally yoked to the Divine Mother. It is our ignorance and preoccupation

with the ephemeral that makes us believe we are alone.

### The Never-ending Story

There cannot be any end to Holy Mother's story. Our times have shown that a new chapter has begun to be written in a big way, with greater appeal to the entire world. Mother-power is not the thundering and blazing type; it is like sweet music, soft, gentle, uplifting. Holy Mother's life, with its every minute detail, has surpassed the achievements of all past divine incarnations. It is as though divinity has expressed itself in the most perfect form as Holy Mother. And if this is divinity, so simple to understand, where is the need to study all those difficult tomes and commentaries, where is the need to practise all those punishing penances? It is enough to gaze at Mother and know what God is like. Holy Mother is God, our eternal Mother who eternally loves Her children. What a comfort it is for us to rest and luxuriate in Her love, forgetting forever our malaise.

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**T**he exalted Empress has of her own accord appeared as an indigent woman. ... She has been undergoing great hardships at Jayrambati in order to teach householders their duties. Infinite patience, unbounded mercy and above all the negation of even the slightest trace of egoism.

—Swami Premananda

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# Adored by Countless People

DR PRABHUSHANKARA

**S**ri Sarada Devi has hundreds and thousands of admirers, most of whom may be called her worshippers. Being one of her admirers, I have several times felt the need to turn my mind inwards and find out the reasons for my developing a reverential attitude towards Mother. For the major part of my life, which spans seven decades, I have been a hard-boiled agnostic, if not a confirmed atheist. But this has not prevented me from admiring Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Sarada Devi.

A critical introspection has revealed to me that I have not developed an almost reverential attitude towards Mother just because she was the spiritual spouse of Sri Ramakrishna, one of greatest personalities the world has come across. When questioned, some of her worshippers have attributed their surrender to her personality to the fact that she suffered no end of hardships, but kept her cool all the time. I could not share their enthusiasm for Mother on that count because I have seen several unsung domestic heroines who have undergone similar, if not worse, crucifixion, with similar equilibrium. I have not even been impressed by the so-called spiritual greatness of Mother, maybe because I have not been able to understand the very concept of spirituality despite my repeated attempts to get at least a glimpse of it. Then what is it that has kept me bound to that great personality, with my non-reverential and atheistic upbringing?

## Her Concern for Girls' Education

Mother hailed from a village far away from Calcutta, which was, during the middle of the nineteenth century, undergoing a historic metamorphosis, the nature of which is too well known to be repeated here. But she

spent her early years in the rural milieu, which was virtually a backwater, untouched by the social changes that were taking place in the faraway metropolis. Even Dakshineswar, a suburb of Calcutta, did not participate, at the time of Mother's stay there, in the cultural revolution that nearby Calcutta was witnessing. As such no one could expect Sarada Devi, who was mostly confined to the dimly lit, cell-like nahabat of the Kali temple, to get exposed to modern ideas like women's education. A stalwart like Nivedita, an intellectual giant with robust optimism in the arena of educating Calcutta girls, had almost accepted defeat in her educational enterprises.

But here was Sri Sarada Devi, who had firm faith in the emancipating power of education for women and also its being a substitute for early marriage of girls! An incident vouching for Mother's predilection for women's liberation is reported. It is revealed in a conversation Mother had on 15 June 1912 with a lady devotee who unburdened her woes to her: 'Mother, I have five daughters. I cannot find suitable bridegrooms for them. I am so anxious about it.' Mother offered a modern solution to the age-old problem: 'Why do you worry about their marriage? If you cannot find suitable husbands for them, please send them to Sister Nivedita Girls' School. They will be trained there. They will be happy in the school.'<sup>1</sup>

Naturally, this secular advice was not received well by the distressed woman, who had expected probably a divine intervention through Holy Mother and a supply of suitable bridegrooms for her daughters. But if we remember that it took two to three more decades to bring girls to the mainstream of women's education even in urban areas, we stand gap-

ing at Mother's realizing the importance of educating girls. This feat of breaking away the shackles imposed by tradition and advocating the efficacy of imparting secular education by a woman who herself did not have the benefit of formal schooling is one of the major factors that made me an admirer of Holy Mother.

### Her Views on Work

Her pithy and aphoristic statement on work is worth contemplating. The *Gita* and other philosophical works have waxed elaborately on work and even called it a yoga. An old lady who had seen Sri Ramakrishna complained to Mother that she is 'attached to the world and is always running after this or that work'. In her characteristic way Mother emphasized the necessity of work sans the attachment it implies. She said, 'One must do work. Through work alone can one remove the bondage of work, not by avoiding work. Total detachment comes later on. One should not be without work even for a moment.' (14-5)

Made quite naturally, this statement of Mother's does not smack of any scholasticism. But all the same it brings to one's mind statements of two great men, one historical and another mythological: Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Krishna. The former said that a thorn is to be taken out with the help of another thorn and both should be thrown away, because neither can be preserved as a museum piece! The brevity of Mother's statement makes it more emphatic: the bondage of work cannot be removed by avoiding it, rather one has to engage oneself in work and that paves the way for detachment. The second half of her advice, that one should not be without work even for a moment, brings to one's mind the famous statement of Krishna, '*Na hi kaścit-kṣaṇamapi jātu tiṣṭhatyakarmakṛt*'; none can be without work even for a moment.'

### She Could Correct Herself

Another act of Mother that appealed to me most was her correcting her own mistakes,

without feeling that she was too great to commit mistakes. I have to quote the entire episode so that one could get a clean picture of Mother's magnanimity. The following incident occurred sometime in 1914.

About this time a middle-aged man appeared at the door of the Mother's room. He was holding the hand of a young woman about sixteen or seventeen years old. He said, 'Mother, she is my daughter. Her baby died this morning, and she is grief-stricken. I have brought her hoping that you will be able to console her.' These words made us all apprehensive.

Mother: 'Come here, darling.'

The young woman entered the room and sat close to the Holy Mother. As she extended her hand to touch Mother's feet in respectful salutation, the Mother moved away a little and said, 'Well, should she touch me? She is now in a period of mourning.'

This action of Mother's shocks us. She is the very personification of holiness and purity. Of course Mother was not free from the heap of superstitions that prevailed during her time. But she had shown extraordinary courage in refusing to wear a widow's dress and continuing to wear golden bangles. But the mass of superstitions was too thick to brush away.

Naturally Mother's words made the bereaved young woman more morose. Feeling embarrassed, she quietly moved away a little. But it is what followed that endears Mother to us.

As the Holy Mother looked at her face, her heart was filled with compassion and she said, 'Ah, my poor girl! You have suffered much so you have come to me for solace. And who knows how much I have hurt your feelings? Come, my dear, touch my feet.' With these words the Mother came closer to the young woman. With her eyes full of tears the girl reverently placed her head on the Mother's feet. And the Mother blessed her by placing her hand on the girl's head. (257-8)

This incident where Mother hastily recoiled from an afflicted woman and felt sorry

for what she did puts her picture in relief and wins our respect.

An incident in *Sri Ramayana Darshanam* by Kuvempu, the Kannada poet laureate, comes to my mind. Vali is surreptitiously killed by Rama. When the former chastises the latter for killing him for no offence at all, Rama profusely apologizes to him with these words: 'Owning one's own mistake is a splendid sign of valour.'

### Her Brushing Aside Trivialities

Mother could show her blessings on the genuine seekers of spiritual help by deliberately breaking all accepted norms. Here is an incident that moves the readers to tears and convinces them of the catholicity that was spontaneous in her. A lady devotee has recorded this incident. She had seen the Master Sri Ramakrishna and Mother in a dream. Let us listen to the narration in the words of that devotee: 'You seemed to be giving me spiritual initiation, but it was not finished. Ever since that dream I have felt a strong urge to take refuge at your holy feet.' Mother graciously replied, 'Well I shall give you spiritual initiation today itself.' On knowing from the spiritual seeker that she lived far away and that she had taken her husband's consent to seek initiation from her, she asked the devotee to wash her hands and feet. The shocked lady said, protesting: 'I have not taken my bath yet!' But Mother showed her courage in brushing aside trivialities and said: 'That's all right. You need not take a bath.' The devotee got her initiation then and there! (258-9)

### She Laughed and Wept Like Us

In spite of people's identifying Mother with the Divine Mother of the universe, or Kali, we are quite at home with her because she laughed and wept as we do. One Nalini Behari Sarkar has recorded his meeting with Mother when she was very ill. He says, 'Once when the Mother was suffering from a dangerous fever at Jayrambati, just prior to her last illness, I was massaging her feet, when she said, "Look, my child, I have been praying for the last few days, but there has been no response. How much I have wept! Even then nothing happened."' Continuing, she says that Jagaddhatri visited her that very day and she was sure of recovering from her illness. (324) Likewise there were occasions when she laughed heartily.

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Mother was a simple rustic lady, with no claims either to aristocracy or sophistication. She had infinite love for the entire creation and laughed and cried like any other man or woman. It is no wonder that she commanded adoration from innumerable spiritual seekers and was held in high esteem by the poor and the lowly, by the rich and the mighty. It is not by accident that the renowned Swami Vivekananda prostrated before her. She was all love and sympathy and hence adored by countless discerning people of several generations. \*

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## Her Living Presence

**H**oly Mother was previously living in her human body. Now she resides in the hearts of every son and daughter and all devotees. The more one will meditate on Mother and Sri Ramakrishna, the more will one come to know of them. Those who have once talked or associated with them can never forget their love in life. Parents just do not know how to love like them.

—Swami Subodhananda

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# Mother's Last Words: Most Primordial, Most Modern

PRAVRAJKA AKHANDAPRANA

If you want peace, my child, look to no one's faults. Look to your own faults. Learn to make the world your own. No one is a stranger, my child. The whole world is yours.<sup>1</sup> She spoke these words from her deathbed to a woman in distress.

## Making the World Your Own

Those were the last words spoken by Holy Mother before she died in 1920 at the age of 67. They are so simple, so beautiful and so impossible—sweet dreams of mothers and children. We often ignore them as too difficult to translate into action in this modern world of international and interpersonal crises. Too difficult to even imagine for people of ancient traditions who cannot get out of old ways of thinking, 'an eye for an eye,' 'might equals right,' 'we are the chosen people, you are fuel for the fires of hell,' 'I am more pure, you are less pure' and so on. People who become obsessed with impurity and dangers often do great harm to themselves and to others. But it is also true that in practical life and in raising children, we can't just indiscriminately go about making the whole world our own. However, this is not really what Holy Mother meant. There is a golden mean in this process, a golden mean which becomes more enlightened as people also become more enlightened. Let us see what some of the enlightened ones of the past have said about 'making the whole world your own'.

Let us begin with some unknown enlightened ones from prehistory, even before the Upanishads were revealed. If we look at clues from prehistory, we can actually find evidence of such enlightened ones. One of the

oldest known clues comes in the form of a carved European flint estimated by scientists to be more than 500,000 years old! Some people of unknown origins chose to carve human female figurines and animals out of flint rather than any other material. Marija Gimbutas says, 'This very early religious symbolism has yet to be systematically studied.'<sup>2</sup> When such evidence is finally studied, the results will make current books on anthropology and archeology obsolete. However, we can make some very basic observations even now. Flint is a very hard, dark stone that was commonly used to make tools and arrowheads. Furthermore, when struck it easily sparked and could be used to make fire. Flint is the embodiment of opposites: fire and earth, energy and matter, light and dark. The female figurines are a silent testimony to a most ancient Power (Shakti), the Goddess, who was the essence, source and harmonizer of opposites. The whole of creation was Hers—it was She Herself. Gimbutas says that the Goddess was the focal point of later Old European life and there was no evidence of a Father God throughout the prehistoric archeological record. From such early beginnings came all the concepts we have today.

In ancient Greece there was a great earth-grain goddess called Demeter (pronounced *Da-ma-tiir* in ancient Doric dialect). Some things are known and written about her, and much is unknown because she predates the writings and the various traditions which later evolved. Her name contains the word *meter* (or *matiir*) which can mean 'to measure out' and which is a standard unit of measure in Europe's 'metric' system. Why would a goddess

have such a name? Because she measures out fairly to all her children (makes the whole world her own). She protects and she saves both in this life and the next.

In ancient Greece, Demeter was the center of the Eleusinian Mysteries which were more popular at times than the ancient Olympics. These annual secret initiation rites were open to all people regardless of economic class, age or gender. The celebrations were designed so that there was no distinction between rich and poor. For example, if someone came to Eleusis in a chariot, he was heavily fined. Demeter is said to have laid the foundations of civilization when she gifted the plough and techniques of farming to the prince of Eleusis, who they say later spread them to the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> Demeter had a daughter, Persephone, who was the personification of light, and when Persephone stayed in the Underworld for half the year, it meant that winter was under way.

Some scholars believe that the cult of Demeter actually had its origins in ancient Africa. In ancient Egypt the great Goddess Maat was the personification of cosmic order, truth, physical and moral law. She was the one who measured out the course of the sun and was the order and energy behind all things in existence (the whole world was hers). In double form known as Maati, she met the dead—whoever they might be—in the Underworld and weighed their hearts against her feather of Truth.<sup>4</sup> As time went on, she became associated with whichever God was in power and was called his 'Eye', for example 'Eye of Ra'. The feather of the vulture and the *uraeus* (raised hood of a cobra) were her special symbols. Interestingly, there was an earlier cobra goddess whose name was Ua Zit or Uatchet or Uachit.<sup>5</sup> In Sanskrit *chit* has been translated as 'consciousness', which as it manifests becomes wisdom.

In Egyptian, *uzait* is a word meaning 'eye' or perhaps 'seer' or 'prophetess or prophet'. In Greek the word for eye is *mati*. Perhaps Ua Zit was the same serpent as Eve's friend in the Garden of Eden! The same serpent concept is found in the caduceus of the medical profession and in many other respected serpent symbols around the globe. It appears that from the name Ua Zit came Au Set ('Great Queen or Lady' in Egyptian) which the Greeks later translated as Isis. Ua Zit, cobra goddess of the earth and the north, had a sister, Nekhebt, vulture goddess of the sky and the south.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Rig Veda* (the oldest known scripture of modern religions), a great Goddess speaks and says 'I am full of wisdom, first among those who deserve reverence. ... I sup-

***The point is that some Goddess-oriented person during those very ancient times had some very high realizations and spoke of a source of Existence, thinking of others and making sacrifices; in other words, trying to 'make the whole world your own'.***

port all Nature's bounties. ... I bestow wealth upon ... those who perform selfless noble deeds. I am the Sovereign Queen of the state (*vach*, the Supreme Word). ... I breathe a strong breath like the wind, giving form to all created worlds; beyond the heaven, beyond this earth, I become powerful in my grandeur.<sup>7</sup> The verses go on to describe how she is the source, supporter, defender of nature, wisdom, the gods, the father, the good, the noble (there are various scholarly interpretations of the original Sanskrit). The point is that some Goddess-oriented person during those very ancient times had some very high realizations and spoke of a source of Existence, thinking of others and making sacrifices; in other words, trying to 'make the whole world your own'.

Interestingly, two similar writings exist

from different traditions. One was written in 2 AD by the Roman Apuleius about Isis: 'I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome sea breezes, the lamentable silence of the world below.'<sup>8</sup> The

ning of *tamas*, *sattva* and *rajas* respectively. *Sattva* could be perceived as the measurer and balancer of the two extremes.

*Ma* is found in some form in numerous languages from Africa to Europe to the Middle East to Asia to Australia and to Native America.<sup>9</sup> *Ma* is the common word for 'mother' in most North Indian languages including Hindi and Bengali. *Uma* is the name of a very ancient wisdom goddess. *Mati* is the Bengali word for 'clay, soil, earth'. In Sanskrit, the long syllable *ma* is a cry and can mean 'to measure'. In the Tantric tradition of India, *Ma* refers to the Divine Feminine. It is very common to see God worshipped as Mother throughout India; just about

any Hindu goddess can be addressed as *Ma*. In some places a whole month is set aside to honour the Divine Mother in various ways. An exceptional little girl is chosen to represent the Divine Mother and she is honoured with a special worship and is called *Ma*.

In Arabic there are two most frequently mentioned attributes of Allah: *ar-rahman* and *ar-rahim*. *Ar-rahman* (note the *ma*) refers to unconditional giving and love for all; *ar-rahman* refers to blessings to believers. The old Semitic root *rh* means 'womb' (*rahmat* in Arabic).<sup>10</sup> In the words *ar-rahman* we therefore find very ancient evidence of a feminine tradition of 'making the world your own', and of seeing a oneness in all Existence. The scholar Neil Douglas-Klotz is bold enough to say that, '*Al-lah* ... is directly related to its predecessors *Alaha* (Aramaic), *Elohim* (Hebrew) and *Elat* (Old Canaanite).'<sup>11</sup> '... *Elat* or *Allat* ... refers to Sacred Unity identical as the Middle Eastern Great Goddess.'<sup>12</sup>

As *ma* is repeated it becomes *mamamam* creating more possibilities for new words. In old Babylonian-Assyrian language *am* is the root indicating maternity and creative possibility. *Mami* was the wise midwife of the gods whose name meant, 'she who responds to

***Unfortunately, the deeper and divine meanings of ma have been largely lost in the West. This is due to the rise of a heroic warrior age and the rise of Abrahamic religions.***

other writing is from the book of *Proverbs* in the *Old Testament* (8.12): 'I Wisdom —(English translation), *Sophia* (Greek translation), *Hokhmah* (original Hebrew)—dwell in prudence and I am knowledge and discretion. I have strength; by me kings reign and princes decree justice. ... When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water; before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills and fields.'

**Different Connotations of *Ma***

One very interesting aspect of the study of Goddess ideas is the word *ma*, which some scholars refuse to recognize as an intelligent word because it is also the cry of animals. But it is this very fact which leads us to the idea that everything is related and that consciousness is, in fact, shining in all things. It is truly amazing to realize how kids, lambs and calves can sound *exactly human* when they call 'ma'—the primordial word which begins with a hum on closed lips and ends in a full vowel with open lips. It not only has a meaning; it has various meanings depending on circumstance and inner feeling—a cozy, sleepy *ma* will not sound the same as an inquiring *maa*, or a life-threatening, urgently cried *ma-a-ah*. These three kinds of *ma* could be said to be the begin-

cries'.<sup>13</sup> *Ama* is the word for 'mother' in Basque language and *amma* is the common word for 'mother' in most South Indian languages, including Kannada, Tamil and Telugu. *Amba* is a word for 'mother' in Sanskrit, as well as *mata*. *Ama-terasu* is the national sun goddess of Japan.

Is it merely a coincidence that the English *am* or *I am* became the word to indicate 'existing, living'? In any language *I am* can have three levels of meaning: physical existence, mental conception and ultimate Existence (the *Iam* of Advaita, Moses and Hokhmah, the ancient Middle Eastern wisdom goddess).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the word *ma* has three levels of meaning: (1) the source of life, warmth, food, protection; (2) the first relating, intelligence, communicating, learning; (3) weaning, independence, responsibility, cycles of life, detachment, ultimate wisdom.

In some locations, *ma* was expanded to *mahr* and *mari*. In Arabic *mahr* is the dowry which the bride receives in order to legalize a marriage. Furthermore, the bride's consent has to be witnessed before the marriage is considered contracted.<sup>15</sup> This sounds very much like a kind of ancient matriarchal rather than patriarchal arrangement. Oddly, the Aramaic word *mare* (pronounced *may-rii*) is usually translated as 'lord' or 'master'. Klotz, however, says that it is a difficult word to translate and that these translations may not be accurate: 'The word's roots suggest obvious power and majesty ... embodied ray of light that reminds us of Unity.' He also says that the Aramaic and Hebrew words translated as 'kingdom' (*malkuta* and *mamlaka*) are actually feminine gendered and could more accurately be translated as 'queendoms'.<sup>16</sup> These factors lead one to conclude that perhaps the Aramaic word *mare* is an ancient predecessor of our English 'Mary' and actually means 'great lady'.

It has been suggested that *maryam* or *mariammes* (singular and plural 'Mary' in Aramaic) was actually a title and that was why so

many women around Jesus had that 'name'. In Hebrew, the ancient Miriam, sister of Moses, was a seeress or prophetess.<sup>17</sup> However, Michael Jordon interprets *mariammes* in terms of priestesses and he emphasizes possible ritual sexual intercourse or 'ritual prostitution'. But it is also possible that *mariam* more accurately refers to 'Great Lady' or 'Great Mother' similar to the ancient Basque idea. The ancient Basque people of the Pyrenees Mountains worshipped the Goddess Andre Mari ('Great Lady') who was the ruler of the three worlds, and of birth, life and rebirth.<sup>18</sup> In other words, *maryam* or *mare* might refer to a woman who has fulfilled her disciplined obligations to womanhood, however that might be perceived. We should not try to judge ancient people by modern standards of ethics, because social values were understood differently. But one value has always remained largely the same: the ideal Mother who loves, measures out, protects, teaches and sacrifices day after day, year after year, through eternity. This universal idea of a Great Mother is the closest conception we can have of 'God'. This is truly the meaning of the words *Ma*, *Maryam* and *Mary*.

These and similar *mar*-based names have spread all over the world in the course of history. In ancient Sumeria there was a city-state called Mari around 2400 BC. Mari was a goddess known to the Cretans, Minoans, Celts and certain Hindu tribes. Hundreds of 'Black Madonnas', many of them pre-Christian, are found all over Europe and Russia. In North India there is still a goddess who causes and cures diseases such as smallpox, whose name is Mariamma. In South India village deities, usually goddesses, are sometimes called Mariamma or Maramma. There is also a dawn goddess, Marichi or Marishi in some parts of India and Japan.<sup>19</sup> *Marichi* means 'rays of the sun'.

*Ma* can also be found in a rather unexpected place in the English language: *man* ('one who thinks, measures'; 'the wise one')

which came from the German *Mann* (pronounced *mun*). In Sanskrit, *man* (pronounced *mun*) is a verb that can mean 'to think, measure, believe, imagine, suppose or feel', depending on context and usage. In Sanskrit, the root *ma* can mean 'measure, exchange or below'.<sup>20</sup> In addition, scholars say there may be an Indo-European root *me* (pronounced *mii*) or *med* meaning 'to measure, consider, reflect'.<sup>21</sup> In Latin *metiri* means 'to measure'. Thus *ma* (short and long), *man*, *med* and *met* (as in Demeter and Damatir which appeared earlier) are variations on the same theme. These roots are also the source of many other words: menses, month, money, medicine and even meditation ('to measure the mind'). There are strong feminine overtones for many of these

time. Deities and such things really disappear at the dawn of enlightenment. The aspirant then realizes that the Mother (*Ma*) alone pervades the entire universe. All then become One. This is the simple truth.<sup>22</sup> This idea is also found in the *Devi Mahatmyam*, a scripture of the Divine Mother: 'By You alone, the Mother, this world is filled.' (11.6)

So we see that *ma* is a very small and humble word, perhaps first uttered by animals, and further developed by early herding people, who slowly carried it around the globe over *hundreds of thousands* of years. Then, *ma* became elevated even to the highest realms of human thought. *Ma* should be the first word on any list of global etymologies. This is the very word which was so much on the lips of

Sri Ramakrishna as he talked and prayed to the Divine Mother of the Universe. This is the great tradition to which Sri Sarada Devi gave her whole heart, mind and soul throughout her life. Whenever anyone—scholar, thief, drunk or sinner—called her 'Ma' she would stop and listen to that person. Although she was born in a small village and never

travelled outside of India, although she spent much of her life in purdah, still she managed to reach out to the whole world and touch the hearts and minds, and sometimes chins, of those who sincerely came to her, from anywhere in the world. In her own village, her father's place, she was able to live much more freely, and people came to her from near and far.

Unfortunately, the deeper and divine meanings of *ma* have been largely lost in the West. This is due to the rise of a heroic warrior age and the rise of Abrahamic religions. Very few people in the West or elsewhere in the world are aware that Hel was a great Northern European goddess whose name in German means 'shining, clear, bright, intelligent and

***The wise ones of the past have all said the same thing—'Learn to make the whole world your own'—in various ways. Thus, we could conclude that these words are not just a fancy that we can ignore. On the contrary, they are a required austerity, especially in this age of globalization.***

words on the physical, mental and spiritual levels. One cannot simply say that these words are unrelated and entirely different. It could even be said that the English word *man* did indeed develop in the course of time out of *ma*. Primordial language no doubt was very terse with much local variation and vowel confusion (as we find in Arabic), but there seems to have been no confusion that the consonant *m* stands for 'mother' and the arts of motherhood in almost all languages!

Interestingly, one can also expand the word *ma* to include both the imminent or the eminent as Holy Mother once did: 'In the course of time one does not feel even the existence of (a separate) God. ... Everything comes into existence in time and disappears in

sacred'. She had a sister goddess, Holle, who was most wise and ancient and lived in the Underworld. Hel was eventually made queen of the Underworld and of the common people by the warrior god Odin, who took over the highest heaven exclusively for warriors who had been wounded in battle. Any ordinary deceased person automatically went to the Underworld and Hel. Of course, later the Christians came and turned Hel into Hell, the place for hopeless sinners. The ancient German word *guth*, which meant 'divine will, divinity, something sacred, auspicious, good, good earth, farm complex', later turned into 'God Almighty, the exclusive God, the Father of all Creation.'

The story of Hel is only one of similar stories from around the world. In India there is also such a story about the dawn goddess, Ushas ('shining, bright, sacred'), who was attacked by Indra until her chariot was broken and dissolved and she herself fled far away. She is the most-often-mentioned goddess in the *Rigveda*, who became completely insignificant in later literature.<sup>23</sup> Ushas had a sister goddess, Ratri, who was goddess of the night. Slowly, modern scholarship is bringing such incidents to light. There is a vast amount of Goddess-centered archeological and mythological evidence that is difficult to assess and easy to misunderstand. But until the Divine Feminine is given her due respect and is encouraged to manifest, there cannot be more peace in this world.

### God as Mother

Why, some may ask, does this idea of God as Mother keep coming around? After studying antiquity, however, it appears that God as Mother may have been the original idea. Then the question becomes, 'Who has been trying to eliminate her?' But, some may

ask, isn't God beyond form, gender and even mind? Yes, but every so often a need comes for relating to such a God. Then comes God the Father, Mother, Friend, Lover, Child—even special plants, animals and objects. It is a way of bringing God into everyday existence and sanctifying it.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say that 'regarding God as Mother is the last word in spirituality'.<sup>24</sup> Swami Vivekananda said, 'Mother is the first manifestation of power and is considered a higher idea than father. ... She is life, She is intelligence, She is love.'<sup>25</sup> 'There is no hope of rise for that family or country where there is no estimation of women, where they live in sadness.' (7.215)

In the list of enlightened comments below, the wisdom of the ancient prehistoric Goddess has been summarized under Antiquarian Religion. As we can see from this list, the wise ones of the past have all said the same

***She is the rock upon which the Ramakrishna Order was established. In the beginning, Swami Vivekananda was faced with so much dissent over his ideas about the new organization that, without the support of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi (and Sri Ramakrishna behind her), they probably would never have gotten off the***

thing—'Learn to make the whole world your own'—in various ways. Thus, we could conclude that these words are not just a fancy that we can ignore. On the contrary, they are a required austerity, especially in this age of globalization.

Antiquarian Religion: 'She measures out fairly (*ma, matiir, meter*) to all her children everywhere. She protects and saves.' (This concept probably originated in Africa among herding people aeons ago. See explanation above.)

Hinduism: 'The best yogi is one who looks on the pleasure and pain of all beings as he looks on them in himself.' (Sri Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgita*, 6.32.)

Buddhism: 'The Awakened One looks with a kind heart equally on all living beings, and they therefore call him "father".' (Buddha's first teaching to the five ascetics at Varanasi after his realization as in Paul Carus, *The Gospel of Buddha*, 49.)

Taoism: 'Surrender yourself humbly; then you can be trusted to care for all things. Love the world as your own self; then you can truly care for all things.' (*Tao Te Ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, #13. Legend says that as Lao-tzu aged and Chinese society declined, he decided to retire alone to the desert. A gatekeeper begged him to first write a summary of his teachings.)

Navajo: 'In Beauty it is felt./ In Harmony it is thought./ In Wholeness it is done./ In Hozho it is finished./ Changing Woman said so.' (Based on Navajo oral tradition as presented in Gerald Hausman, *Meditations with the Navajo*, 3,12.)

Judaism: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' (Revelation to Moses; see *Leviticus*, 19.18.)

Christianity: 'Who is your neighbour? Even the untouchables (Samaritans); even the enemy.' (Jesus to a lawyer about the Good Samaritan; see *Luke*, 10.29 ff. Also, Jesus teaching the Beatitudes; see *Luke*, 6.27 ff.)

Islam: 'We sent you but for one purpose—as a mercy for all creatures.' (Revelation to Mohammed; see Koran, 21.107). This mysterious 'we' is similar to *Genesis*, 1.26: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' 'We' has been interpreted as creative energies or spirits of the universe and there is a feminine quality to them. A most common Hebrew name of God is 'Elohim', which is plural. One could interpret this as meaning 'all-inclusive', 'one and many', 'she/he'—all in one. It might also mean God of gods and goddesses, or God immanent (inherent, within) and God emi-

nent (beyond, without).

Sri Ramakrishna: 'God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries.' (*The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, 559); '... one may have that single-minded devotion to one's own religion; but one should not on that account hate other faiths.' (To various devotees, in the *Gospel*, 223.)

## Afterword

Could the Vedanta Movement be doing more to help us make the world our own and to bring more peace and harmony into our daily lives? Perhaps it could even be in the forefront of a global effort. Oftentimes when enthusiastic monks speak, the burden of the 'Vedanta work' is put on the shoulders of the 'Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement' with great emphasis. This approach will never be enough and it will never help heal the old wounds of ages past. Such an approach will actually put great limitations on the search for global wisdom.

Holy Mother is the Primordial Mother who measures out for all her children (like Demeter of Greece). She looks into the hearts of each and every child (like Maat of Egypt). She was there when the first *ma-a* was uttered by some calf, kid or lamb at the dawn of the world. She is the rock upon which the Ramakrishna Order was established. In the beginning, Swami Vivekananda was faced with so much dissent over his ideas about the new organization that, without the support of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi (and Sri Ramakrishna behind her), they probably would never have gotten off the ground.

If there is one thing this world needs at the present time, it is pockets of people here and there living everyday lives and trying to make the whole world their own in whatever way they can. There is no better inspiration for this than the life and words of Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother. She is an essential part of our 'formula' for global wisdom. As Swami Vivekananda was the first Hindu to travel the

world and successfully share the ancient wisdom of Vedanta, so Sarada Devi was the one who embraced the world by giving her positive blessings and strong encouragement for him to do so—a very radical thing for a brahmin woman of her times. \*

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## Both Are One

Look upon the Master and Holy Mother as one and the same. Always keep in mind that one cannot reach Holy Mother without the grace of Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Ramakrishna without the grace of Holy Mother. The Master is as it were Lord Narayana, and Holy Mother Goddess Lakshmi. Pray to Holy Mother for infinite power; for nothing worth the name can be achieved without Shakti. The Master is indeed Rama and Krishna. And Holy Mother is none other than Sita and Yogamaya. This time the Master's advent on earth was in disguised form.

—Swami Vijnanananda

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# So Simple, Yet So Profound

SWAMI ATMASHRADDHANANDA

In our attempt to gain an insight into the life and personality of Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi, the biggest obstacle that comes in our way is her utter simplicity. Her disarming simplicity leaves a superficial student of her life bewildered. Our modern mind is used to complexities; it is not used to simplicity as such. We hold that to be simple is to be naive, and that is somewhat undesirable. With this kind of mindset when we approach Holy Mother, who was simplicity itself, we land ourselves in unknown territory. It is not her simplicity but the profundity behind it that leaves us perplexed. Though Holy Mother was rooted in simplicity, her life was one of spiritual profundity, which sets numerous practical but knotty spiritual issues clear and simple.

## Practical and Down-to-earth

Outwardly, Mother lived an obscure life, away from din and bustle of social life, behind a veil of silence and modesty. But it was not a life of escape from the realities of the world. Who was more practical than her? Her distilled wisdom in practical matters was so incisive and down-to-earth. 'I want people here who are careful in work,' she said once. 'There are those who perform great deeds on the spur of the moment. But a man can be really known from the interest he shows in the details of each duty.'<sup>1</sup>

## An Irresistible Appeal

Standing alone amidst the mad frenzy of various sense pursuits, when one looks for a place where one can lay to rest one's restlessness and frustration born of repeated failures to obtain the Infinite in this finite world, Holy Mother's life and simple words have a sponta-

neous and irresistible appeal. Her simple yet profound life sets ablaze all artificiality and self-righteous rationality, which bind us firmly to this world of maya. Unlike many others, the beauty about her lies in the fact that she lived what she taught. If she said we must love all without any distinction, she did it herself to perfection. She was an illustration of her own teaching.

## Nothing Is Insignificant

Her life was a great wonder. She was not a writer or a platform speaker. Nor did she preside over public meetings of any sort. She lived the simple life of an average housewife: cooking, cleaning, washing, sweeping or attending to the endless chores of everyday life. This she did with meticulous care and perfection. She could not bear slipshodness of any kind. When once someone threw away a broom after sweeping, she had no hesitation in rebuking the person: 'The work is finished, and you throw it away carelessly. Should you despise a thing just because it is insignificant? ... Won't you need it again? ... You must give each one his due share of honour. Even a broom must be shown some honour. The smallest work must be done with reverence.'<sup>2</sup> Her motherly heart knew the significance of all apparently insignificant issues of life.

## Immersed in Service

Mother's everyday life was steeped in service and spirituality. Her day began in those quiet hours of dawn, when unseen by public gaze she immersed herself in the refreshing waters of God-consciousness. Performing daily ritualistic puja, attending to various tasks of housekeeping, solving tricky relationship problems, guiding the spiritual

aspirants who flocked to her, or nursing the infant monastic order of Ramakrishna with her far-sighted counsel—Holy Mother was busy throughout the day. But it was all laced with a divine touch that made her life a harmonious melody of inner perfection. She lived a usual life in an unusual way: so simple, so commonplace externally, but so spiritual, so deep internally. All her acts were acts of adoration of the Divine, but it was all so very silent that one could hardly see through them. ‘It was not easy to recognize the Mother, behind her rural simplicity, lack of modern culture, and absence of pelf and power,’ writes one of her biographers. ‘... [Sri Ramakrishna] spoke about the Mother in fun, “She is a cat under ashes.” As the true colour of a cat covered with ashes escapes the notice of a casual observer, so also does the true stature of Holy Mother elude the ken of ordinary men.’<sup>3</sup>

### Attuned to the Divine

Holy Mother’s mind was immersed in the Source of all sources. All troubles in life begin when we move away from the Source. We come away from our real abode, our divine nature, and get identified with an unreal, ephemeral something called this world. Being away from the Source, our inherent divine core, we get bogged down by the multiplicity of creation and lose our way in the world of the many. But we see in Mother an extraordinary capacity to retain her mind at the Source and yet deal with the manifold world with ease. Words fail to express what it means; one can only marvel at this capacity. ‘I have never seen such a great mind. ... I have never seen in anyone such attachment, nor have I seen in anyone such detachment,’ said Swami Saradananda, her devoted attendant till the end.<sup>4</sup>

### A Unique Mind

When the human mind is free from all attachments, it becomes perfectly free from selfishness. An unselfish mind is a storehouse of infinite love and compassion. In Holy Mother

one sees an unusual manifestation of this pure love. In fact, she *was* love. ‘Can you call him a man who is devoid of compassion?’ she would say, ‘He is a veritable beast. Sometimes I forget myself in compassion. Then I do not remember who I am.’<sup>5</sup>

### Solution to the Threefold Misery

The one solution to the varied problems we encounter is to develop a capacity to love and understand others. If we reflect on our troubles, trials and tribulations, we will discover to our dismay that most of them are man-made or, more precisely, self-made. Hindu scriptures divide misery into three types (*tapa-trayas*): misery caused by elements of nature, misery caused by other living beings and misery caused by ourselves. Holy Mother’s life and teachings contain many practical suggestions and ways to overcome misery at all levels.

Take for example the case of misery caused by forces of nature. Apart from the natural calamities that cause devastation and destruction, man himself contributes his mite to the misery caused by nature. Think of global warming. Think of the decreasing level of pure air or the rate at which pollution is increasing, threatening the very existence of life on this planet. Who does it all? Can we overlook the human role in natural disasters?

Or think of the misery caused by other human beings. How many sophisticated gadgets are available today to kill millions in no time! Think of the hunger, starvation and disease that stalk this earth; or the crimes and injustice committed every day.

Think, and then ponder over what Holy Mother has to say. Mother’s solution is, in sum, to look within. She insisted on being introspective, on assiduously cultivating our spiritual nature. This is how a mystic finds his solution: from within. What we require is inner freedom. Government laws cannot make anyone free internally. Inner freedom is cultivated by living a life of self-imposed regula-

tions and disciplines. When we reflect effectively enough, we see how much misery is caused by our ego through its greed and meaningless sense pursuits. Nature provides us what we require but it is we who, out of our unrefined nature, exploit her recklessly. Introspection will make us realize the need to respect her, as also respect our and others' spiritual nature. Whether it is environmental pollution, deforestation or the ever-increasing means of committing crimes and violence, man has the biggest responsibility to shoulder.

'The mind is everything. It is in the mind alone that one feels pure and impure,' remarked Holy mother.<sup>6</sup> We must always remember this simple but great truth. Consider now the misery we cause ourselves. The seeds of our misery are not outside but inside us. Our attitudes, our behaviour, our actions, our words—these make our life what it is. They are at the root of our misery. The origin of self-created misery lies buried deep within us. And the root cause of all our misery lies in the ignorance of our real nature. Our spiritual poverty, born of this fundamental ignorance, keeps us begging at the door of innumerable desires, which we keep foolishly nourishing without realizing their inability to give us what we seek. They may satisfy us for a while but cannot fulfil us forever. That is what makes us miserable.

Holy Mother laid great stress on cultivating our spiritual nature by regular practice. Only regular spiritual practice can clarify our vision of life and its purpose. It is then that the compass of our life properly points towards God, as it always should. To experience God is the purpose of human existence. It is the only

thing that lends meaning to human existence. But what does God-realization mean? In her characteristic simplicity, Holy Mother explains it thus: 'What does a man become by realizing God? Does he grow two horns? No, what happens is that he develops discrimination between the real and unreal, obtains spiritual consciousness, and goes beyond life and death.'<sup>7</sup> How clear and precise!

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In conclusion, like Swami Vivekananda, we too will have to content ourselves by saying, 'You have not yet understood the wonderful significance of Mother's life—none of you. But gradually you will know.'<sup>8</sup> 'You' means us, whose spiritual infancy needs no elaboration. Gradually, Mother willing, as we grow spiritually, we may become blessed enough to plunge into the depths of her simplicity and spirituality, and feel the profundity behind her simplicity. \*

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She who is Sita, she who is Radha, she who is the Primordial Power Kali—she incarnated Herself in this age as Sri Sarada Devi. Prayers please the Mother Peaceful. She is Vidyamaya. By taking refuge in her one gets rid of the darkness of avidyamaya. When the Mother is propitiated, Sri Ramakrishna, being pleased, showers his grace on the devotee.

—Swami Abhedananda

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# Her Appealing Human Aspect

SWAMI ATMAJNANANDA

When we think of Holy Mother it is but natural that her motherly love overshadows all other aspects of her personality. It was to demonstrate the Motherhood of God that Sri Ramakrishna trained Sri Sarada Devi and invoked the Universal Mother in her through the Shodashi Puja. When questioned by a devotee as to why she survived the Master, she said, 'You must be aware that the Master looked upon all in the world as Mother. He left me behind for demonstrating that Motherhood to the world.'<sup>1</sup>

It is her utterly simple, approachable, humane qualities that revealed her motherliness, and it is this human aspect of hers that is most appealing. But Holy Mother's seeming ordinariness is only a cloak which hides her spiritual history. About the significance of incarnations Swami Vivekananda says:

There are always some giant waves in the ocean of affairs, and in you and me the life of the past race has been embodied only a little; but there are giants who embody, as it were, almost the whole of the past and who stretch out their hands for the future. These are the sign-posts here and there which point to the march of humanity; these are verily gigantic, their shadows covering the earth—they stand undying, eternal!<sup>2</sup>

Even the ordinary actions of such divine personages carry deep significance and are intended to convey a message. In fact, their life is their message. There is no dichotomy in their personalities. In the words of Swami Saradeshanandaji:

To people in general, the coming of an Incarnation is for the sole purpose of revealing to man what is beyond his intellectual understanding. So, the ordinary actions of an Incarnation seem to them to be of no purpose. Though from the ordinary point of view this seems to be true, to

the heart of a devotee, the attraction and the feeling of wonder that these very actions produce are matters of supreme importance. The Lord comes down as a man to produce in the devotee's heart the 'sap of love' and a feeling of 'my-ness' with regard to Him. This gradually destroys the separateness between the Lord and the devotee, and the feeling that 'He is my very own' grows to such an extent that ultimately it may even produce the realization of the devotee's oneness with the Lord!<sup>3</sup>

## Her Childlike Simplicity

Mother was so naive and simple that she would be surprised if somebody could clean the lantern efficiently or wind the clock—things she failed to master and so considered very difficult! She found the water tap hissing one day and ran out of the bathroom in fear, thinking that a snake had entered the pipe! She would at times behave like a little girl and this would amuse those around her. Once when the cook was absent at Jayrambati, Nalini Didi was baking chapatis and Mother and a young boy called Rammay were flattening the dough with rolling pins. The boy was an expert and could do four at a time. Nalini Didi remarked that the chapatis rolled by him were better than Mother's. Mother was piqued by the comment and, like a little girl, pushed away the rolling pin with an unhappy frown. She had made chapatis all her life, and in such huge quantities, and here was this mere boy getting all the credit. It took some time for the boy to convince Mother that Nalini Didi was confused and hence the misunderstanding. It was Mother's chapatis that were fluffy and round! This immediately pleased Mother and she resumed rolling the dough. Such displays of her childlike nature added charm to her personality and made her all the more lovable.

Holy Mother's simplicity was so unobtrusive that at times it nonplussed her devotees and her monastic children who attended on her. There was no affectation in her demeanour; everything was spontaneous and unprompted. All the qualities of guru or goddess her devotees attributed to her mattered little to her. She had dethroned her ego completely and Sri Ramakrishna had occupied all her thoughts and actions. Yogin Ma was at times surprised to see her posture and words totally resemble the Master's. But Mother would brush aside such observations casually and emphasize her human nature. She did not like her devotees to look upon her with awe. She resisted their attempts at distancing themselves from her. She would not even hesitate to offer water for the devotees to wash their feet, or clean the place after they had finished eating.

### Her Empathy

Such actions of Holy Mother made her very approachable, and her children could relate to her without inhibition, opening themselves up to her soothing touch. One Yatharth Ghosh, a well-to-do resident of neighbouring Desra, once came to Mother mourning the loss of his adopted son. On seeing her he

burst out into loud lamentation: 'Alas! he died the day before yesterday!' At this sudden outburst, the broom dropped from the hand of the Mother and she just sat down at that very place on the ground unmindful of her dress, her eyes full of tears, her countenance depicting extreme sorrow, and her voice choked up in her throat. The old man, with tears streaming down his eyes, narrated all that had happened and thus relieved himself of the pang of sorrow in his heart. The Mother, too, was listening to everything attentively; only now and then the great feeling of sorrow in her heart came out of her in loud lamentations. ... The great pain in Yatharth's heart abated considerably under the soothing influence of the Mother's sympathy.<sup>4</sup>

She did not tell the distressed man that the world was illusory, as a Vedantin might

have. To her, his grief was real and needed consolation. By sharing his misery she relieved him of it and saved him from turning mad.

It is precisely her ability to understand and share others' feelings that attracted such tormented people to Holy Mother. We would be mistaken to presume that people came to her seeking spiritual guidance alone! People of all kinds came to her and she could relate to each one of them, hear them and lift their minds from the mundane to the divine. Her selfish brothers and mad relatives sought worldly gifts and undivided attention much to the chagrin of the devotees. When they remonstrated and sympathized with Mother she did not disown her relatives but accepted her circumstances as the will of the Master. Her love for them did not suffer; instead, she endured all the suffering with equanimity. One may argue that such examples are not rare in our everyday world, that many a woman finds herself in such demanding circumstances. But Mother's greatness lies in the fact that she was never ruffled in spite of having to manage the affairs of a large family and tend to the needs of so many devotees. Everything about her was so serene and calm. One moment she would be talking to devotees about abstruse spiritual matters and the next moment she would be kneading flour or dressing vegetables for her large family. Behind all these activities there lay an inner calm, a spiritual current, that is not seen in ordinary mortals. Mother's inner spirituality gave her the ability to raise her mind instantly to higher levels.

Although Mother came from a very traditional village background, she was intensely practical and reasonable in her approach. She never enforced rules but let ideas sink in slowly. When a devotee from East Bengal expressed surprise at young widows taking fish in West Bengal, Mother came out with a very convincing and positive answer: 'This is but a local and regional custom. In our part, young

widows are allowed to take fish and wear bordered saris and jewellery. They naturally harbour these desires. If they are restricted from eating fish, they will take it stealthily. When they become convinced that they are doing something against social injunction, they will give it up.<sup>5</sup>

### **Upheld Tradition but Was Free with Devotees**

Mother was not trying to license such breaking of traditions. She was herself very meticulous in observing them. She would bow down to the village priest in spite of his protests and touch her forehead to the ground as a mark of respect before entering or leaving the village. She would not eat bread made by Muslims or Christians but would herself feed foreign devotees like Nivedita or Ole Bull when they visited her. She entertained the daicoit Amjad against the wishes of the others in the household and would accept his gifts of vegetables or fruits. Traditional rules and observances paled into insignificance when she was with devotees. Again, all these acts were so natural and guided only by her pure love and maternal instincts. It is indeed unimaginable for us to equate Amjad with Swami Saradanandaji. But to her such differences were of no consequence, for she was the Mother of all.

### **Could Not See Others' Faults**

Golap Ma, one of her close associates, was once loudly abusing a servant for shoddy work. When Mother came enquiring what it was all about, she remarked: 'Oh, there is no point in telling you, you cannot see faults in others.' As a matter of fact, Mother had fervently prayed to God and cultivated this habit of not seeing others' faults. She thereby succeeded in embracing all of humanity with her motherly love. How much trouble we undergo in trying to see and constantly dwell on other's faults! We nurse feelings of hatred, jealousy and revenge against people who are

'causes' of our suffering. We try to justify all our deeds by blaming others and try to disown responsibility for our own actions. As Thomas à Kempis says, 'We feel and weigh soon enough what we suffer from others; but how much others suffer from us, of this we take no heed.'

However, this not seeing other's faults was to Holy Mother an effortless outcome of her motherly nature, which was reinforced by her spiritual attainments. Her attitude towards fault-finding can be understood by her last message: 'But I tell you one thing—if you want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger. The whole world is your own.'<sup>6</sup> This statement of Holy Mother is born of her total identification with all creation and represents the practical aspect of Vedanta. To see difference and discriminate is ignorance, because there is nothing that is not God. Everything emanates from Him, rests in Him and finally merges in Him. Mother put this lofty Vedantic principle in such plain words. It is obvious that she was simply articulating her realization and not seeking to philosophize at all. Illiterate though she was, she gave utterance to such profound truths in her own artless way. But how difficult it is to practise this one teaching of hers!

### **Mother First**

Though Mother was always conscious of her divine nature, she hardly revealed it to others. Very rarely did she make self-revealing disclosures, but even these were never intended to impress. They were occasional rays of light escaping the thick veil with which she kept herself covered. She was happy to be seen as her devotees' own mother. To her the pure and sweet mother-child relationship came above all other things. Devotees saw their long-lost mother in her and felt at home in her presence. She would feed them and care for them like her own children and would feel sad

when they took leave of her. Though she was very graceful and reserved in her interactions with men devotees, even the elderly among them felt themselves to be her children.

The disciples of Sri Ramakrishna held her in very high esteem and resorted to her advice when confronted with problems. They saw no difference between the Master and her. Swami Vivekananda would prostrate full length at her feet and seek her blessings. His tribute to her could not have been more eloquent: 'To me, Mother's grace is a hundred thousand times more valuable than Father's. Mother's grace, Mother's blessings are all paramount to me.'<sup>7</sup> Swami Premananda once remarked that they (Sri Ramakrishna's monastic disciples) were sending to Holy Mother the poison that they could not swallow. And she did swallow all that poison, a tiny fraction of which was enough to kill others, but which in her case became her brightest ornament. She had been commissioned to do this and it was natural to her. When a devotee hesitated to touch her feet thinking that it would cause her suffering, she said, 'No, my child, we are born for this purpose. If we do not accept others' sins and sorrows and do not assimilate these, who else will do so? Who else will bear the responsibilities of the sinners and the afflicted?'<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

Sri Sarada Devi was the mother of all, not their judge. For to judge is human, but to love, forgetting all shortcomings, is divine. She

came as Sri Ramakrishna's counterpart and manifested the ideal of unselfish motherly love that asks for nothing in return and always seeks to uplift all those who come under its influence. Her spiritual attainments expressed themselves tangibly through her human form and gave mankind a glimpse of true Motherhood.

Holy Mother's unsullied purity is attracting people from all corners of the globe and her message of love is transforming numberless lives even today. Just as her life, her message too is captivating people very silently. People are drawn to her picture, but cannot express what in it charms them so much! Shall we say it is her simple motherly love, her infinite concern for her children's well-being? \*

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## What She Taught

Those who have had the good fortune of sitting at the feet of Mother even for a little while realized in their hearts that Mother taught her children to have strength of character, renunciation, forbearance, faith in God, steadfastness in devotion and devotional practices, and complete dependence on God under all circumstances. These, she maintained, were essential for the building up of their lives. Neither in her nor in her children would one find any trace of excessive emotionalism. Every one of them would be found gentle, quiet, serene and calm.

—Swami Saradeshananda







*What Appeals to Me in*  
**Holy Mother**



## She Is a Role Model

PRAVRAJIKA AMARAPRANA

When we study Holy Mother's life, we find that it encompasses all spheres of human activity. On all levels, she is our peerless guide. It is our good fortune that Holy Mother's life is an open book, and all of us have full access to her unselfish love and unparalleled wisdom, which she applied across the total spectrum of human experience and aspiration—sociological, psychological and spiritual. She has, by her example, given us first-hand instruction on how to meet the challenges of this multifarious universe. We know this from her own words, 'I have done much more than necessary to make my life a model.'

Holy Mother demonstrates for us the perfection that can be reached in the performance of karma yoga. And she achieved this at what appears to be the most ordinary level, as a householder spending her time cooking, cleaning and attending to the needs of her children. In fact, her statement 'I have done much more than necessary to make my life a model' was spoken in response to a query by one of her young attendants, who, after watching her participating in the husking of the paddy, asked anxiously, 'Mother, why do you slave like this?' To set an example, that is why.

All of us need help, all of us need direction. Mother has given us a road map to guide us along the way. At Jayrambati, she happily went about performing all the household chores. Besides the responsibility of her own large family, she also looked after the comforts of the many devotees who visited her. And there are many stories of how even in the smallest things, she would take the opportunity to give an instruction here or add some comment there that would raise an activity to another level for the participants. For exam-

ple, when an overly eager worker dropped and ruined the special diet that had been prepared for Radhu, Holy Mother took it very seriously and said, 'I want people here who are careful in work. There are those who perform great deeds on the spur of the moment, but a man can be really known from the interest he shows in the details of each duty.' As we reflect on such responses of Holy Mother, we discover that they are relevant to our own life situations and provide insights into how we can consciously and correctly conduct ourselves in our work.

On the psychological level, it is Holy Mother's love that attracts us most. Everyone is looking for that kind of love, that kind of acknowledgment. Here we find it spread out before us. Love, concern, compassion—it is all there, fulfilling the longing within every human heart. She expressed that love in myriad ways, as in statements like 'I cannot contain myself when one draws near me and calls me mother', and 'I do not know anyone, not even an insect, for whom I do not feel compassion.' But she was not there only to give. She expects her children to emulate her. As Christ told his disciples, 'Love one another as I love you', so Holy Mother advises us, 'If you want peace, my child, don't find fault with others. ... Make the whole world your own.' It is the universal message of a world teacher, calling us to travel with her on the right royal road that leads us to the Lord. Her interpretation of her own place in this grand undertaking is expressed in her statement 'The Master left me behind to manifest the motherhood of God.' Always she called attention to the spiritual aspect of human life, using ordinary circumstances to point to something beyond the mundane. As Sri Ramakrishna said, 'She is Sarada, giver of

essence.'

Following this line of thought leads us to the great fact of her complete and total dedication to the Master and his mission. This she emphasized repeatedly. Every aspect of her daily life revolved around the living presence of Sri Ramakrishna. Ultimately, of course, we know that Holy Mother is identical with him, but to fulfil her role in his mission, she made the Master the all in all. 'You will gain everything if you take refuge in the Master,' she tells us. 'The Master is the basis of all that we are. He is the ideal. You will never take a false step if you hold onto him under all circumstances.' In this also, she is our infallible guide, the most direct route to his feet.

Holy Mother's insight into the human condition was absolute. As she herself said, the whole play of Mahamaya stood revealed before her. The wisdom with which she dealt with so many different types of people and all their various problems, including those of her own family, provides us with a living example that every one of us can apply to his own individual circumstances. Reflecting on some of the instructions she gave in the area of interpersonal relations, we find a code of behaviour that is of a different order; to follow it, one must be prepared to take a higher standpoint. For example, there is her teaching on how to love all equally: 'Do not demand anything of those you love. If you make demands, some will give you more and some less. In that case, you will love more those who give you more

and less those who give you less. Thus your love will not be the same for all. You will not be able to love all impartially.' This idea represents a radical departure from one's natural inclinations, and one must swim against the current of so-called normal behaviour in order to practise such a high ideal. But if the challenge is taken up, within this apparently simple instruction lies a seed that will bloom and grow into the beautiful flower of same-sightedness.

Everywhere impartiality forms the backdrop of Mother's life. It is readily seen in the incident where she tells Nalini that the Muslim, Amjad, is 'just as much her son as is Sharat'. It is evident as well when she gently explains to her young attendant that 'the foreigners are also my sons'. She adds, 'Can I afford to be partial? I have to carry on with all.' And, if we are really serious about following the Holy Mother's example, we must also carry on with all, for our own salvation and the good of the world. 'No one is a stranger, my child. This world is yours.' How fortunate we are to have placed before us a clear vision of what we must be and become in order to aspire to live an ideal life in these extremely complex times in which we find ourselves. And the far-reaching influence of her legacy is still unfolding before us.

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California*

## Loving God While in the World

JOANN CALVE

**H**oly Mother's life yields tremendous inspiration when we contemplate the choices she made, the acts she performed and the words she spoke. What has been just as instructive for me, however, has

been to understand her life within a larger context that includes possible choices that she *did not* make, things that she chose *not* to do or say.

In any spiritual aspirant's life, the ques-

tion quickly arises, 'How do I live a spiritual life in the midst of the world?' Just asking the question implies that the spiritual world and the empirical world are split. Somehow we must have more of the spiritual and less of the worldly. Somehow we need to make different choices and do things differently. But what?

I've asked myself that question many times over the years. It has been prompted by circumstances both external—loss, tragedy, dissatisfaction with my profession—and internal—feeling that I must find a way to express my love more fully, that I must live a more principled and conscious life.

Attempts to answer it originated on the slippery slopes of my mind. Which means that as my mind changed, and consequently my view of the world, the answer kept changing. Even more importantly, no matter how hard I've tried, I've never been able to reduce the size of the world much because I need a certain portion in exchange for food and shelter. So, round and round I go, returning again and again to the same question. Surely there must be a wiser way, guided more fully by the heart, to approach this problem.

What appeals to me so tremendously about Holy Mother is how she lived so profoundly the answer to this most basic question, what she did in each moment and what she did not do. She did not try to change external circumstances, nor did she try to extricate herself from them so that she could live more spiritually. She did not try to acquire a new role for herself or redefine herself. She did not try to do less in her life because she felt that or-

dinary responsibilities were beneath her. She did not choose to react when she was grieving Sri Ramakrishna, when she was misunderstood, sick, harassed or facing poverty. She did not allow her mind to judge those who came to her as more or less worthy of her attention.

What she did do was love God completely while remaining centred in the ordinary activities and roles of the life that was given to her—the life of a woman named Sarada Devi, who was born in a little village in a particular time and place in the world. She could no more control the facts of her family, her conditioning, her opportunities or lack thereof, or her culture than any of us can. But within the unique and, by most standards, impoverished circumstances of her life, she accomplished the extraordinary: inner mastery leading to God-realization. Quietly. Modestly. With steadfastness and humility.

Her approach, just as her heart, was unconditional. With her life as an example, there is great hope. Even in the muck and ordinari-ness of my own life, even if nothing were ever to improve, I might still become a more spiritual person.

Within her loving embrace I am comforted to know that all I need do is surrender to her. Holy Mother's example could not have been more simple or more profound: 'Accept your life. Turn your mind to God.' May we all become more like her.

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## She Speaks to the Heart

### PRAVRAJIKA SEVAPRANA

**D**uring the celebration of the birth anniversary of Holy Mother we are bound to wonder what it is that makes Holy

Mother's life and teachings so universally appealing. Even after 150 years she is still reaching out to transform the lives of spiritual seek-

ers all over the world. Her timeless message cuts across all barriers of race, sex, age or nationality. What is it that makes her so attractive and draws one and all into the orbit of her love? It is this: she speaks directly to the heart.

We are really blessed by having so many photographs of Holy Mother available to us. These beautiful pictures have a living quality about them. I often hear people ask, when seeing her photo for the first time, 'Who is that lady?' There is something arresting about her face that catches and holds the attention and makes people want to know more about her.

Some years ago I was asked by a hired nurse who entered the room of a patient and saw a picture of Holy Mother on the wall, 'Was that her mother?' The real answer to that question is, 'Yes. She was her Mother. She is your Mother also.' How is it that even just seeing her face one feels touched by her boundless love?

It is because Holy Mother speaks to the heart. Her pure love can be seen shining in her face. Just take a picture of hers and look into her eyes. You will find that she is looking directly at you and that look is full of compassion and love. It is the same love for all people, for all time. Taking the help of her photograph, or with eyes turned inward, allow her to look at you and you will find she is speaking directly to your heart. This is the message of Holy Mother. It unties the knots of the heart and removes all barriers. It is a love of such purity and power that before it every stain is wiped away. She does not see our faults or weaknesses, but sees us as we really are in our own true nature.

As Swami Vivekananda says, 'In the heart of all there is Unity.' She sees this One-

ness. Allow her to gaze on you. If you are able to take refuge in her, you will find that she unlocks the door to your heart, removes sorrow and brings peace. She answers our prayers. Though established in Advaitic knowledge, she is Karunamayi, the compassionate Mother who removes all sorrow. She is Anandamayi, who brings bliss to the heart. She herself is the door to the Infinite.

It is said in the *Yoga Sutras* that one should meditate on the heart of an illumined soul. Fully enlightened Holy Mother's heart is here, available to us now. She has taken this form for the good of the world. Meditate on her heart. Her heart is pure, clarity itself. She is very simple, yet her love encompasses all. She speaks in the language of the heart to every one of us.

Human love or even compassion, although it does purify and expand the heart, may have a certain weakness in it. It may not be able to remove the suffering of another. We may in all sincerity feel sympathy and even love and yet be unable to lift the burden of another.

A mother feels helpless when she sees her own child suffer. But Holy Mother's love is full of grace, full of divine power. She is that divine Power itself, and as such she can remove all suffering. With a glance, with a word, with a touch, she transformed the lives of numerous devotees during her lifetime. And her grace is still with us. With a glance, a word, a touch, she is still speaking directly to the heart. She has a message for all mankind. It is the timeless message of universal love.

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**W**ho can understand our Mother? ... Is it the function of an ordinary being to have digested the worship of an incarnation like Sri Ramakrishna? ... Mother has been taking the sins and afflictions of many people on herself, and redeeming them. Could anyone else but the Divine Mother Herself have this power?

—Swami Brahmananda

## Refuge of the Destitute

SUBRATA KUMAR DHAR

I had sadness as a constant companion for many years. Life seemed dull, monotonous and meaningless. I was like a yacht without a sail and rudder, constantly tossed by turbulent waves of circumstances that invariably made me their victim. All this robbed me of my health, money and energy. There was a great deal of difference between what I wanted to achieve and what I actually was. Whatever endeavour I undertook ended in sheer misery, yet success lured me on like a mirage. Inevitably, this led to a low opinion of myself and a feeling that life in this competitive and contemptible world was useless. Love, fellow feeling and the like were mere empty words on people's lying lips, whereas jealousy, hatred and malice seemed to find ample space in their hearts. Here, no one bothered about the downtrodden, the failures. All my hopes evaporated, despair's dark clouds hovered about me. By day I watched myself sink and then the nights would bring in their terrors. I came to dread life.

One day, amidst this utter despondency, a light broke through that completely changed my life and lifted me out of my sorry state. It was due, perhaps, to some past karma, I don't know—and I don't care. This celestial light was nothing but the compassionate grace of the all-merciful Holy Mother, whose effulgence illumined every nook and corner of my life. It was like the sun suddenly breaking through dense clouds. I happened to chance upon a book containing reminiscences of Sri Sarada Devi written by those fortunate souls who had enjoyed the ecstasy of sitting at her holy feet.

Unbelievably, as I flipped through the book, my problems started flying away. I was at once captured by her reassuring pledge:

'Never fear. Whenever you are in distress, just say to yourself, "I have a Mother."' I became convinced that she was the harbour where I could moor my battered yacht. Words fail to describe my feelings as I continued reading. The whole universe and its denizens—men, animals, good, evil, ugly, beautiful, losers, winners—all belonged to her. Generally speaking, everyone wishes to be father or mother of the good and the beautiful, rather than of the bad and the ugly. Who but Holy Mother can dare say, 'I am the mother of the wicked, as I am the mother of the virtuous. ... I am the mother of all.'

I was amazed when I read that even in failing health, not long before her passing away, Holy Mother used to keep awake till two in the morning. Asked why, she replied, 'How can I sleep my child? All these children come to me with great longing and take initiation, but most of them do not practise japa regularly ... but since I have accepted the responsibility should I not see to their welfare? I do japa for their sake.'

What appeals to me in Holy Mother? *Everything! Everything!* Holy Mother's love, wisdom, compassion, concern, practicality, insight, hard work, forbearance, dignity, culture—the list is endless. And all the pictures of hers that we have—wonderful! So divine, so heart-warming, so uplifting! Appeal is a mild word. I would like to dance with abandon with Mother's name in my heart and on my lips. I gaze at Holy Mother and am astounded how she could have done it. Well, who else could have done it? Blessed I am, blessed is the whole world!

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# I Look Forward to Learning More

INGEBORG CARTE

I was thirty-five years old, had a good life and did not want any change, but still there was an empty feeling in me as if something of great importance was missing. To find some answers I started reading. The works of Hermann Hesse and C G Jung and the Existentialism of Sartre did not give me solutions.

Books on Eastern religion and philosophy spoke of how well-trained gurus in India guided earnest seekers and helped them lead fuller and more satisfying lives. Guidance was developed into a science by illumined souls over thousands of years. That was fascinating, but how could an Indian guru be found?

That question was on my mind when we moved in 1967 to Union Street in San Francisco. On our walks we passed daily the New Temple or the Old Temple of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. One day someone invited me to hear a talk by a monk of the Ramakrishna Order trained in India. I was delighted. Here was taught what I wanted to learn. But there was no guru for me. The swami in charge, Swami Ashokananda, was sick at that time and guest swamis conducted the services. One evening a swami talked about the importance of guru in Vedanta.

After many years of waiting and seven moves from Europe to San Francisco still there was no guru for me! I felt utterly dejected and went home in tears.

That night I had a dream. A lady in a white cloth was sitting with outstretched legs, hands folded in her lap. She said to me with a sweet smile: 'Do not worry, my child! We are one big family.' I had read about Sri Sarada Devi the Holy Mother, had seen her pictures and knew it was she who had talked to me. These words of Holy Mother gave me assurance and peace. I understood that one guru

power came through Sri Ramakrishna and Holy Mother to the monks and devotees of the Order. They were like a family.

From that time on we attended the functions of the Vedanta Society. In 1970 Swami Prabuddhananda came and my husband and I became his disciples, ready to learn and to be guided in our search for a more meaningful life.

At the centre of all my practices was Holy Mother, her picture, the story of her life, her words. With what motherliness she treated those who came to her! Again and again she said, 'God is one's very own. It is an eternal relationship. He is everyone's own.' I wanted that closeness but how did one achieve it?

Meditating on Holy Mother was divine and as my very own mother, I asked her for joy, protection and peace. At special moments I felt Mother close, fulfilling my wishes. At other times she seemed far away, which was depressing to me. Was there a way to bring more stability into spiritual life? Instead of meditating on a divine Being outside in an image or picture, one could also meditate on the Divine inside oneself as one's own peace and support. In that way real closeness would come and one would stay even-minded in the ups and downs of life, saying, 'Oh, peaceful Mother, I am in you and you are in me.'

Having Holy Mother as guru, my spiritual life is ever new, relatively easy and fun. Many things have been revealed to me and I look forward to learning more.

*Ms Ingeborg Carte, a long-standing devotee, was known for her unwavering support of the Vedanta Society of Northern California. She passed away on 31 October 2003, when this issue was in preparation*

## My Gentle Bliss

OMPRIYA

What appeals to me most in Holy Mother? Her deep loving concern for all, the simplicity of her teachings, and her being an exemplar at all times.

When I first arrived at the Providence Vedanta Society, in 1975, I was moved when I first saw the photo of Holy Mother. Looking upon her face I was touched by her serenity and peace. Upon a closer look, I saw her divine inner strength.

As I read her life's story, I felt a kinship. I saw myself sitting at her feet, working at her side, and listening to her teachings and following her example.

I was brought up in the Catholic tradition. I was always drawn to the image of Mother Mary. There was a statue of hers in the church grotto. I would go to the church daily after school and spend time praying at Mother Mary's feet. In her presence I felt an inner calm and peace. I felt protected at all times.

Years later after I left the church I felt the loss of being in the grotto and in her presence—until I saw the picture of Holy Mother. I was overjoyed when I found out that Mother was worshipped. Again I could pray at Holy Mother's feet and know in my heart that she protected me at all times.

I remember once while talking to Swami Sarvagatanandaji about Holy Mother, he smiled at me and said, 'If you take the name of Mother, what else do you need?' Those words touched my heart then and still do.

When she walked to be at Sri Ramakrishna's side because she did not for one moment believe what was being said about him, I felt her courage and her determination.

That in itself is a teaching. There are moments in people's lives when they must exer-

cise inner courage and strength, when they must walk into the lion's den.

When she was able to talk the robbers out of hurting her, again she gave a lesson. If you are in a situation where good judgement must be used, you need not panic. You stop and draw on your inner wisdom to make that situation right. You had to smile when you saw how her sweetness turned them into her helpers instead.

I was struck by the lesson she gave about the broom. When someone threw the broom into the corner after use, she reprimanded the person. From that moment on, I have tried to treat with respect brooms or other utensils that are of service to me.

She was a true mother. When her devotee-children arrived at all hours of the day or night, she saw to it that their every need was attended to. Although she had no biological children of her own, her mother's heart accepted them all as her own.

Many years ago, a friend came to visit me at my home. It was her first visit. As I showed her around, she stopped when she saw Holy Mother's picture. Turning to me she asked, 'You want to be just like her?' Without hesitation I answered, 'Yes.'

Whenever I sing *Prakritim paramam*, I feel Mother standing at my side. It is my prayer to her. It is my love for her that makes me sing with all my heart.

I try to follow her teachings in a calm, quiet way. She is and will always be dear to my heart. She is at my side at all times. She is my gentle bliss.

*A student of Vedanta, Ms Ompriya is in touch with the Vedanta societies in Boston and Providence*

## Embodiment of Motherly Love

ULKA PAI-DHUNGAT

**T**o write an article about Holy Mother is like trying to put the whole ocean into a little cup. She is so vast and has so many aspects to her personality that it is very hard to choose one. But one ray of her personality that touched my heart most is her motherly love towards all her children. It is that divine love which is manifested as Holy Mother.

Sri Ramakrishna puts it nicely when Holy Mother asked him how he regarded her. He replied, 'The Mother who is worshipped in the temple, the mother who gave birth to this body—the same mother is now stroking my feet. Really and truly I always regard you as the embodiment of the blissful Mother of the Universe.'

We can go through her life and see a glimpse of that divinity from her childhood. How motherly she was and how patiently she cared for her siblings and relatives. She continued to do so throughout her life even while they gave her so much trouble.

Sometimes even a few worldly people experienced her divine nature. One incident that comes to mind is when she was returning to Dakshineswar with several ladies. After some time she could not keep pace with them and lagged behind. In the darkness she came face to face with a fierce-looking dacoit who, after seeing her face and hearing her sweet words, felt he was seeing Mother Kali Herself. Instead of robbing Holy Mother, he and his wife lovingly took care of her.

She could never turn away anybody who called her 'Mother'. When she was carrying Sri Ramakrishna's meal one day, an immoral woman called her Mother and asked if she could carry the food. Mother consented, but Sri Ramakrishna was not able to eat that food. He asked Holy Mother not to allow that

woman to carry his food again. Holy Mother refused to promise him saying that, 'If someone addresses me as Mother, I cannot refuse their wishes.'

Such a strength and so much spiritual insight in that motherly love of hers! She always worked so hard to take care of Sri Ramakrishna's young disciples and devotees. She used to cook and feed them. Sri Ramakrishna sometimes disapproved of her feeding them more at night. On that, she could sharply tell Thakur not to criticize their eating, for she was looking after them. Only as Divine Mother could she answer that way to Sri Ramakrishna, the spiritual giant; not as wife or disciple.

There are so many incidents like these in her life where wholeheartedly she looked after her devotees and sacrificed her own comfort to make them comfortable. This embodiment of the Motherhood of God cooked for them, cleaned their plates, washed their clothes and shed tears for them. She anguished over their troubles, looked after their comfort day and night and fulfilled each one of her child's innermost heartfelt desires without concern of their caste, race, age or position in society. Whoever came to her and called her Mother, felt free and full of bliss in her presence.

Even now, so many devotees like us still feel her motherly love which gives us peace, freedom and strength. I would like to conclude, imagining all her children in this world wrapped in a blanket of ignorance and dreaming the dreams of happiness and misery, and this Mother of the three worlds as Holy Mother watching over us with tender loving eyes.

*Ms Ulka Pai-Dhungat is a core worker of the Vedanta Society of Northern California*

## Her Accessibility

JAMUNABAI M PRAKASH

**T**he ebb and flow of life is misery at its worst and uncertainty at its best. A foundation in the unchanging Reality is a necessity and not a choice, if I want to be a person I can live with and learn to love. With this difficult task at hand, Holy Mother's teachings appeal to me because I always know where I stand.

Mother can aid any spiritual mindset on any path: karma, bhakti, raja and jnana. At the outset, Mother's life and teachings had no appeal to me whatsoever—even her photos seemed to be nondescript. Eventually, I realized I was terribly wrong.

Several years ago, I had asked a young six-year-old devotee, who was her favourite among Thakur, Ma and Swamiji. Being a young college student at the time, I expected her to say Swamiji, or even Thakur. She answered simply, 'Mother. Because I can understand her.'

I was floored and intrigued. I found out she was right. Sometimes reading about Thakur's life would leave me wondering, 'Where am I going to find that kind of bhakti within me?' Also, there are times I cannot soar to the outer reaches of intellect with Swamiji. With Mother, I find it does not matter what my problem is—the emotional bent of my mind or the depth of my perception—I need only open a book on her teachings and I find my answer.

Mother's teachings are invaluable as an analytical tool. It does not matter whether you are experienced or a novice to spiritual disciplines; her teachings are complete and direct. I read the words of her simple language, and can determine for myself whether I have practised that discipline or not.

For example, her famous saying 'If you

want peace of mind, do not find fault with others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child; the whole world is your own' is an intense practice on its own. When faced with a situation, I just ask myself, 'Have I found the faults in the other person or myself?' or 'Am I treating this person as a stranger or as my near and dear?' I know I just need to answer the questions simply. Sometimes it is hard for me to answer these questions clearly. I know this means I have to keep working until I am able to firmly answer them. Of course, once I am able to answer them honestly without a doubt in my heart, I know I will have to start working to put them into practice.

Perhaps the most meaningful thing to me is Mother's accessibility: that I am Her child—as we all are. Initially, it can be a little awkward to think of Thakur as your father or someone like of Swamiji as your brother, but Mother as your own mother is a natural choice.

I was once lamenting to my guru of my stupidity when he abruptly cut me off. Pointing to Mother's picture, he bellowed, 'Look at her face! Look at her face and tell me you are stupid! How can you say you are stupid when you are her child!' He was right. Just one look at her face and I know who I am.

Even now, whatever difficult endeavour I undertake, I begin with, 'Mother, if you wish me to fail, I will fail; if you wish me to succeed, I will succeed.' Then I go forward and never look back—that is where I stand.

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## Absolute Tranquillity

SUDESH

I would say what appeals to me most in Holy Mother is her tranquillity of mind. Calm and placid like the still waters, unfathomable and profound like the boundless deep—such was Holy Mother. Spontaneously she accepted everything that fell to her lot. From the free and open village atmosphere she willingly agreed to live in a small room at Dakshineswar, and later in a small shed on the roof of a house at Shyampukur, when circumstances demanded. What peaceful acceptance of the heavy load of work that fell on her shoulders all through her life! And she performed it all in a spirit of loving service, never feeling them to be a burden.

Calmly did Mother bear bodily pain when suffering from malaria with enlargement of the spleen. Her treatment consisted in having the region of the spleen branded with burning plum wood! And she also maintained perfect mental poise in the face of extreme torture inflicted on her by a defiant Radhu and her insane mother. Any ordinary person would have found himself in an abysmal pit of despair if he had to undergo even an iota of what Mother did. As Hriday grew proud and haughty, he got into the habit of insulting everyone, including Sri Ramakrishna. Often, he slighted Holy Mother too. Sri Ramakrishna once warned him: 'Look here. You may insult me, but don't hurt her feelings. If He who dwells in this (meaning his own body) hisses, you may somehow get by; but if He who dwells in her (meaning Sarada Devi) hisses, no one—not even Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva—will be able to protect you.' Yet, calm and composed as Mother was, she never even hissed. She might have sometimes mildly protested, but that was only from the human plane. From the lofty and rarefied heights of her conscious-

ness, the outrageous and insolent behaviour of others must have appeared to her as follies and frailties of mere babies, buffeted by waves of suffering and starved of love. That is why she bore no malice, no ill feeling for anybody, but only motherly love and sympathy that fell in ceaseless torrents upon one and all.

Fluctuations of fortune had no sway over her serene, tranquil mind. With what peaceful acquiescence she could accept the highest homage and honour bestowed on her by Sri Ramakrishna through the Shodashi Puja! On the other hand, she remained unruffled in the face of utter neglect after his mahasamadhi. With calm fortitude she endured extreme poverty, when she did not have even salt to add to her rice and had to live like a beggar woman. And later, when devotees worshipped her with rich offerings, Mother accepted their worship—for *their* own welfare—without the least trace of spiritual vanity, completely unselfconscious.

In spirit and in mind Mother always dwelt in the silence of her soul where no external disturbance could intrude and cause a ripple. That is why she could look at all the changing phenomena of the world, accept all events and circumstances with her characteristic tranquillity. Was it not a state of constant samadhi? This spontaneous serenity which Mother radiated—isn't it the ultimate Knowledge, the supreme Goal of human life? And this state was so natural to her; she did not have to retire into solitude for it. Yet the ordinariness of Holy Mother's life won't allow us to understand her profound oceanic depths.

While Sri Ramakrishna keeps us spell-bound by his devotional singing and dancing, his visions and ecstasies, Holy Mother does so by playing another role, equally fascinating

and significant, in the same divine play. She touches the inmost depths of our hearts with her absolute tranquillity and perfect peace. Hers is the peace that Swami Vivekananda expresses best:

It is death between two lives,  
And lull between two storms,

The void whence rose creation,  
And that where it returns.  
It is the goal of life,  
... And Peace—it's only home!

*Ms Sudesh is a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna from  
Ambala*

## The Mother Is Aware of the Child

DR SAIBAL GUPTA

Once Srimat Swami Bhuteshanandaji Maharaj began a lecture on Sri Sarada Devi by saying, 'In any discussion on Holy Mother we are reminded again and again of our own smallness, inadequacy and impurity. We do not have the ability either to explain or reveal her.' So how can I, the least among his disciples, fathom what even he says he cannot fathom or reveal? I cannot hope to come anywhere near Revered Maharaj in purity or wisdom or vision.

It took me a long time to recognize Holy Mother, our real Mother who, though she had to undergo great pain, assumed a human form so that she could be close to us. Even as I was becoming conscious of her presence in my life, I confess in all humility, I could not help but feel a little sad. Why was she so late in coming? Why did she not take me when I was young? Maybe I too could have become a monk and enjoyed the freedom, peace and bliss of being her instrument, instead of suffering lifelong delusions?

However, this feeling of sadness is also gradually passing, as I realize that Mother has always been there with me, only I was not aware. She has been guiding my life all the time, as she does everyone else's.

The child is not so aware of his mother's presence as the mother is of her child. She is always there beside him, looking after him in the best possible way. To her the child is an object to love, care for and raise well. This is as

true of our cosmic existence as it is of our little earthly homes. That is why Holy Mother said she was our 'real Mother'.

Rather than her instruments, we are her children, whose needs and strengths vary. If we do her work well, we are filled with joy and a sense of fulfilment. That is just what Mother wants, our fulfilment. She does not want to reveal who she really is. To whom should she reveal herself, when everybody is her own child? All beings throughout the entire universe are equally her children, she herself said.

For those who wish to be rational, a lot of arguments may be advanced from religion and philosophy, science and psychology. But at the end of the day if one has not felt Mother in one's own heart one has gained nothing. It may be argued that feelings are deceptive; it may be asked, where is the proof? There are concrete proofs everywhere. But we can see them only if we lay bare our lives and our psyche before our own selves and before Mother. We can all reach the deepest levels of our existence if only we have the courage. And if that courage is lacking, even the most solid of proofs will be meaningless. It is this that accounts for the great gap between religious experience and empty polemics. The simplest thing for us to do is to love Mother; then we can feel her deep love for us.

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and devotee from Kolkata*

# She Will Walk Me Through

GENEVIEVE BASSETT

**I**t is so difficult to live in this world, and that is why having someone like Holy Mother as a role model is a blessing. She gives me a kind of strength to carry on even when things seem hopeless.

I pray to Holy Mother and ask her to help me when I get frightened of life because of all the suffering in it. Then I think about how she lived after Sri Ramakrishna passed away, her life as an ordinary mortal, living with her family and taking care of them. Because I am a wife and a mother taking care of my family, her life is the one I look to for guidance. I know she can help me.

When Holy Mother went back to live with her family after the death of Sri Ramakrishna her life was not easy, but still she had the capacity to love. She lived in the midst of family dysfunction, quarrelling and turmoil and yet was able to have inner peace through it all. She knew that there was something more to life, she knew about God. By this example she sets in my mind the faith that God will take care of my family's problems if I let Him. Only by having that faith do I feel I can have the inner peace that Holy Mother had. That is what I pray for.

I think about the greatness of Holy Mother, when after giving so much love and devotion to her own family, she then extended her grace and love to Sri Ramakrishna's family, his disciples. She was their mother, inspiring them, teaching them and helping them.

She was instrumental in establishing the Ramakrishna Order, without which I would not have had the opportunity to know her or to know Sri Ramakrishna or to know all the

swamis I have met, especially the swami who became my guru. I want to be like her in the way she inspired others. I want to be instrumental in inspiring the people around me at least to feel good about themselves. In order to do that I have to feel good about myself first, and this is what she does for me. This is a very important thing she does for me.

Whenever other people upset me, Holy Mother comes to me. She reminds me of her teaching about not seeing the faults in others. Not only is this a remarkable teaching, but she also gives us the reason for it. She said that by thinking of other people's faults, we would absorb them. This makes so much sense to me that I strive intensely to follow that rule.

I feel happy about Holy Mother's life when I read about her life with Sri Ramakrishna. One might think that she had a difficult time as his wife, but I don't. I think it was the happiest time of her life. I think that every duty she had to perform at that time was not a duty at all, but a blessed event, one that filled her very soul with happiness. And I was so happy to read how Sri Ramakrishna appeared to her after his passing. What a wonderful way for him to show his love for her.

I think of Holy Mother when I want to pray to Sri Ramakrishna. She is there with him and she will help me when I want to reach him. Sri Ramakrishna is the gateway to the Infinite, but Holy Mother is the one who will walk me through.

*A student of Vedanta, Ms Genevieve Bassett is in touch with the Vedanta societies in Boston and Providence*

Is our Mother an ordinary mother? For the good of the world, the Mother of the Universe embodied Herself to give liberation to souls.  
—Swami Shivananda

# Indefatigable Strength of Motherhood

RAJNY KRISHNAN

When little girls play with dolls it is a sign that their mothers have inspired them to do so. A mother guides and prepares her children to perform through observation and repetition. She cares for the household by understanding the various needs of its members. She functions as an all-rounder in the family by maintaining it through cleaning, replenishing its energy reserves by feeding and caring, providing emotional support through love, attention, instruction and solace. Most often this unassuming member's significance is underestimated until the others' spiritual eyes are opened to the fact that she is but an aspect of the World Mother.

If the human mother's role, performed at the micro-level, were imagined to be carried out at the macro-level, one could have an idea of the resulting wonder: the primordial World Mother, the creator and preserver of the world. This being an inferential concept, most of us need physical examples to draw parallels. History has witnessed such 'Mothers' who being human have at the same time transcended their roles to become known as Universal or Holy Mothers. Transmuting a finite feminine role into an infinite, all-embracing one is indeed admirable, to say the least. Our Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi is one example who could establish a pure, straightforward relationship with everyone, like a mother with her children.

My first glimpse of her photograph told me right away that Holy Mother was a mother to the core, in every sense of the word. Highlighted by her graceful demeanour and devoid of any superfluous gesture of compassion or divinity, her simplicity instantly put me at ease with her. I recognized the fabric of

her being as transparent love. It signalled pure motherly affection. However, as I read more of her life and teachings, Mother Sarada Devi's forbearance and fortitude struck me as awe-inspiring; so too her struggle and perseverance in life and spiritual matters. Her uncomplaining attitude, her grit and strength in guiding disciples inspired in me deep respect. A teacher's worth is appreciated only when his instruction is put to practice. Just so, with each passing day I am able to understand the value of Holy Mother's words as I try to apply them to my circumstances.

Reflecting on Holy Mother's life often gives me an uncanny feeling that it is actually a well-conceived drama whose plot doesn't unfold till the end. It is no mean plot that Sarada Devi was chosen to be wife of the Great Master Sri Ramakrishna, and that too at a tender age of five. In fact, his identification of her as the Divine Mother of the Universe and as his own shakti is one of the main themes of their divine play. Only she had the capacity to preserve the traditions of the land and yet make for new allowances that the changing times demanded. Sarada Devi fit her role of World Mother like a glove.

Numerous incidents of Holy Mother's life have left such a deep impression on me that I sincerely strive to adopt their morals in my own life. Important among them is her unattached and impartial love that expected no return. The deliberate suppression of her divine nature in order to remain close and accessible to her devotees strikes me as a very compassionate gesture befitting one who would be the mother of all. Unassuming in behaviour, she appeared to seem surprised that things should turn out the way she wished. To me she is the Goddess of Peace and Happi-

ness. I cherish her practical advice to make a habit of prayer so that we can remain calm and unruffled in the midst of the trials of life.

One of Holy Mother's extremely relevant qualities is her disapproval of carelessness and waste. She showed proper respect to even a simple broom or a basket. She would have us feed a cow, a dog or even fish, the food that we would otherwise carelessly throw away. She is also an example of unceasing work. Through cooking, caring and making arrangements for worship she remained busy throughout the day.

Her total identification with the Master is yet another remarkable thing about Holy Mother. She guided all to the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* to find answers to their queries and blessed her devotees in the Master's name.

She respected all the traditions and

norms of society, obeyed caste rules and social codes with discrimination.

She summarized her life and teachings by saying that by realizing God, one develops discrimination between the Real and the unreal, obtains spiritual consciousness and goes beyond life and death. According to her, God is one's own and can be realized in spirit through intense feeling, sincere love and devotion for Him. However, at the dawn of enlightenment even God and other deities are seen as maya. The aspirant then realizes that the Divine Mother alone pervades the entire universe. Then all become one.

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## An Auspicious Light

SUNITA CHATTERJEE

From scriptures, sages and saints we know God is omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. God is One and equally present in all human and non-human souls. This very Indian conception of God is generally coupled with the following beliefs: 'God helps those who help themselves', 'The right way of praying for God's help is to put one's heart in His work', 'Without making use of our God-given talents and faculties, we cannot receive His blessings.' But these ideas and beliefs are brushed aside when we talk about our Holy Mother, Sri Sarada Devi. She will give us whatever we ask for, whenever we ask for it—just like our very own mother. She is full of love and affection for all her children.

Our Holy Mother does not discriminate between her children as to who is high or low, rich or poor, learned or ignorant, cultured or uncultured. There lived in Jayrambati a Muslim dacoit called Amjad. Mother knew that

Amjad was a dacoit and Amjad also knew that Mother knew about his profession. In spite of this, he visited her often, sometimes with gifts. Once Amjad was employed in some building work in Mother's house. At noon, Mother called him for lunch and asked him to sit on the veranda. Nalini Didi, Mother's niece, was serving the food. Since Amjad was a Muslim, she was tossing food onto his plate with aversion. Noticing this, Mother got annoyed and started serving the food herself with utmost care. After Amjad had finished his lunch, Mother cleaned the place herself. She later remarked that to her Amjad and Swami Saradananda (who lovingly served her for many years) were equal.

Mother loved not only people but also animals and birds. There were quite a few cats in her house. One day Jnan Maharaj hurt one of them. Mother was upset and cautioned him against repeating his mistake because, she

said, she lived in them too. She used to feed them with small fish every day. Mother kept a pet parrot, Gangaram, and taught it to say 'Hare Krishna Hare Rama Krishna Krishna Rama Rama'. When Gangaram was hungry he used to call out, 'Ma, O Ma!', which brought Mother hurrying to it with food.

Holy Mother stressed women's education and was delighted to inaugurate Nivedita's girls' school in 1898. Once Radhu, Mother's niece, was preparing to go to a nearby missionary school. When Golap Ma came to know of it, she rebuked her. She wanted to know how it was possible for such a grown-up girl like Radhu to go to school. Hearing this, Radhu burst into tears. Mother intervened saying that age should not debar a person from getting education. If Radhu was educated she could benefit herself by learning to

do some work and also be of help to others. Thus Mother succeeded in sending Radhu to school. This is why Sister Nivedita remarked that Holy Mother was a perfect ideal for women of the modern world.

Holy Mother's life is like an auspicious light; it is like a beacon in the darkness of ignorance. Her life is an ideal that shows the right path to women and men, young and old. By emulating her everyone everywhere is bound to become more loving, more dutiful and truly spiritual—all of which will naturally change our society for the better. This is what appeals to me in Holy Mother. Besides this, I also find her simplicity, patience, power of endurance, compassion and concern for others very inspiring and uplifting.

*Ms Sunita Chatterjee is a devotee from Kolkata*

## An Ideal for Everyone

PRISCILLA CARDEN

'Can a nation rise or become great unless the primordial energy that lies dormant in women is awakened?' This question was asked by Swami Vivekananda in a discussion with his brother disciple Vijnanananda.

The great swami continued, 'I have travelled all over the world. The condition of women everywhere is more or less the same; it is particularly miserable in this unfortunate country of ours. ... Once there is an awakening in women, you will find the whole nation awake and making great strides. That is why Holy Mother has come. After her advent there has been a stir among the women of all countries. This is just a beginning. You will see many more things hereafter.'

That was said in 1898 or 1899. It is now 2003. We can all testify that the prophecy is be-

ing fulfilled. This generation has seen a noble-hearted woman as Prime Minister of India, and wept for her too, when her own guards assassinated her. We have seen another woman as Prime Minister of England. One of the earliest elected leaders of Israel was a woman. Eleven women have received the Nobel Peace Prize.

What of Holy Mother? Sri Ramakrishna said of her, 'She is full of the rarest wisdom. Is she of the common run? She is my Shakti (Power).'

After his passing away, she lived with her relatives in a poor village of Bengal, bringing up motherless nieces and serving quarrelsome and greedy brothers, while doing back-breaking work. Part of each year she was a cherished visitor in Calcutta, cared for by Sri Ramakrishna's faithful disciples. Accom-

panied always by dependents and teased for money by her own brothers; criticized, scolded; sometimes suffering from malaria—day after day she brought order out of chaos and peace out of war as only the best of mothers can do. She sets an incomparable example to women, of both East and West. As Swami Nikhilananda points out in his biography of Mother, by her serene detachment she also sets an example to world-renouncing monks.

She told a disciple, 'You know the Master worshipped Divine Mother. He left me behind to reveal that Motherhood.'

Swami Shivananda once asked a devotee, 'What books are you reading? Can you

read our lives? Our lives are the Upanishads.' He was speaking of Sri Ramakrishna's disciples. Holy Mother was his first and truest disciple. We can learn about her from biographies and from vivid diaries kept by her spiritual sons and daughters.

'I am the Mother of the wicked, I am the Mother of the virtuous,' she said. It is easy to think of following her example. We all know, or think we know, what a mother is. But if I seriously try to listen and follow, I feel as if Maku and Nalini are listening, or not listening; also Radhi; and yes, Pagli too.

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## The Way to Same-sightedness

SHYAM GOHEL

Religious reflection—usually characterized as passive and grave—on the life and words of Holy Mother is of a different kind. Her spiritual naturalness shows that the practice of spirituality does not make us inert, otherworldly, or spiteful of the world. In a sense, there is no action that is not spiritual, that is not leading Godward or goodward, that is not bringing us to ask the questions, Who am I? What is the purpose of life? What is truth? There is no other way of answering these questions than reflection on our experience.

Holy Mother's unassuming daily routine so greatly differs from stereotyped or romanticized spiritual practice. The beginning of religion is inner transformation. What follows is neither the life of action—the life of consistent and strenuous virtue—nor the life of contemplation—the 'active annihilation' of our perception of unreality—exclusively. Holy Mother guides us individually according to our capacities and sentiments. We each have in-

side us truths and paths that lead to the realization of our potential divinity, the divinity that is selfsame in all. Remembering and inwardly trying to actualize this potential always is the first and final spiritual practice. Reaching this end—called Enlightenment, Liberation, Self-knowledge, Truth—is again a beginning. The easiest method of remembering our true selves is by constantly striving to see this potential divinity in others also, and by serving them.

The counterpart of inward transformation is not outward religiosity. Holy Mother's inner spirituality, which expressed itself as childlikeness and motherliness, was not obvious by her outer appearance or actions. She converted none, sought no congregation, wrote nothing, lectured never.

That silence is the acme of spirituality is true, but silence does not mean inaction. Holy Mother's service to the Master and her love for all are, in fact, a true index of her spirituality. Our religion, then, is to serve Holy Mother's

children keeping in mind what she said: 'I am the Mother of the virtuous; I am the Mother of the sinful ... I am the Mother of the good and I am the Mother of the wicked.' This socio-spiritual aspect of religion is also a kind of meditation that complements our time in solitude in the prayer room.

The practice of spirituality following Holy Mother's example quickly makes us same-sighted. Her acceptance of us as we are, virtuous or wicked, induces us to see beyond good and evil, beyond accomplishment and mistake, in others as in ourselves. 'Each man should be treated not as what he manifests, but as what he stands for.' This is why our reverence of Holy Mother does not distance us from her, does not make us feel sinful or spiritually inept. She invests us with her divinity, saying it was ours to begin with. Swami Nikhi-

lananda rightly says, 'Holy Mother inspired reverence but never a feeling of remoteness.'

None was rejected who addressed her as Mother. Nevertheless Holy Mother knew that one day she would have to leave us behind and make us assume responsibility for ourselves and work out our own salvation. But we need not fear. We cannot lose our way as long as we firmly believe in her assurance 'Whenever you are in distress, tell yourself, "I have a mother."'

This remembrance of Holy Mother's personality and reflection on her words is in itself a kind of worship. And the result of such worship is the realization of one's real spiritual nature—and of one's unity with other souls in service.

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## She Is Our Own

MARTHA SADLER

**H**oly Mother and Sri Ramakrishna are one. When in meditation Holy Mother and Sri Ramakrishna merge, the duality becomes one. If one perceives one's own self as feminine or masculine, one has an unintegrated personality subject to the primitive impulses of body awareness.

I came to know Sri Ramakrishna first and of course met Holy Mother through him. My first sense of true intimacy with her came when I read about the tortured relationship she had with her mad niece Radhu. My own mother had a similar kind of relationship with a close member of our family. Still, she made great sacrifice for my welfare at the same time, never to be repaid.

Some questioned Holy Mother's attachment to Radhu, but Mother knew at every mo-

ment who she truly was. She once said, 'Where will you find another like me? Try and see.' When one has the knowledge of one's true Self and God, it enables one to resolve the destructive friction that plagues some relationships. It is good when a higher power draws one above everyday pettiness.

Once Radhu physically attacked Holy Mother causing her great pain. Mother looked at the photograph of the Master and said, 'Lord, please forgive her misdemeanour, for she is senseless.' Christ on the cross said, 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.' What great models they are!

Holy Mother knows well our suffering. After Thakur's death she was disconsolate. During a visit to Vrindaban she had a vision of the Master in which he appeared to her and

said, 'Why are you weeping so much? Here I am. Where have I gone after all? Only from one room to another', thus greatly reassuring her. When I was suffering deep grief after my husband died, my guru sternly reminded me that my husband might have gone to a better place. Much later, I came to experience both intense grief and joy as the same emotion.

Holy Mother became utterly indifferent to the world after Thakur's death until the Master entangled her by entrusting the care of Radhu to her. But, in the final days before her death, Mother gave up all attachment to Radhu and her family in much the same way we often observe dying patients withdraw from the world.

When I read about Holy Mother, I feel compelled to worship her. When I worship the Master, I feel compelled to read that great *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* recorded by Mahendranath, but only the life-experiences that strike deep in the heart and the help of the guru can

reveal any kind of true meaning in the scriptures.

I often wonder about Holy Mother and Kali, the Creator and Destroyer. I never find anything destructive in Holy Mother's nature or behaviour—only discrimination. To me she had a Shiva-like nature. As she said, 'If you want peace, do not see the faults of others. Rather see your own faults. Learn to make the whole world your own. No one is a stranger, my child. This whole world is your own.' When one sees the whole world as one's own it becomes much easier to contemplate leaving it.

Holy Mother is the Master, she is Guan Yin, she is the Bodhisattva, she is the Virgin Mary. She is the Divine Presence, she is the Eternal Infinite. She is our very own Mother. And, somehow, I see my own mother and daughter and granddaughters in her image.

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### She Is with Us ...

**H**oly Mother was a living embodiment of the non-attachment taught in the *Bhagavadgita*. In every action, great or small, she practised yoga, or complete union with the Godhead. Her will was one with God's will. Though a householder, she never deviated from the ideal of renunciation laid down for monks. She did not shun disagreeable duties nor did she welcome agreeable ones. Through all her activities she never forgot God. ... The secret of her inner peace, poise and contentment was her unceasing communion with God. Even when her body or sense organs were extremely active, her heart was directed to God, like the needle of a compass, which points always to the north. ...

Three shrines now stand as memorials to Holy Mother, all erected by the loving care of her beloved child Swami Saradananda. One is the Udbodhan, where she spent the last eleven years of her active life. The second, a white temple, stands on the bank of the Ganges at the Belur Math, where her body was consigned to fire. The third, another white temple, has been erected on the site of her birth at Jayrambati. From the top of this temple flutters a flag emblazoned with the simple word 'Ma', reminding her devotees from far and near of her repeated assurance that she would stand by them till their hour of liberation, and recalling to them her words of benediction: 'I am the Mother of the virtuous, I am the Mother of the wicked. Whenever you are in distress, say to yourself, "I have a mother."'

—Swami Nikhilananda